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Fukushima Fallout in Japanese Manga: The Oishinbo Controversy Through the Lens of Habermas' Discourse Ethics

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Abstract

Japan's 2011 Fukushima nuclear plant calamity created a global focal point for debate about nuclear energy, and a notable forum for dissent. The incident, marked by the meltdown of three of the nuclear facility's reactors, is the largest nuclear incident since the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster of 1986. In 2014, the popular Japanese manga *Oishinbo*, authored by Tetsu Kariya, helped set off a firestorm of intense debate in social and traditional media when it published a fictionalized account of the environmental and health hazards for residents living close to the plant. This paper explores the ethical implications of such portrayals in a fictionalized medium through the theoretical lens of Jürgen Habermas and against the unique backdrop of Japan's evolving media landscape and tumultuous recent environmental history. Habermas' discourse ethics theory is well situated to analyze this complex case, in spite of the eventual and well-publicized suspension of the *Oishinbo* comic. Habermas' favoring of a public moral discourse that is free of power imbalances, and one in which the superior argument for society as a whole ultimately prevails, helps contextualize the important but contentious discourse that took place across Japan in the wake of Kariya's publication about Fukushima, and the responsibility of the manga in balancing the well-being of Fukushima Prefecture residents with a broader public interest. By connecting his actions to a transcendental purpose of giving voice

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to a marginalized constituency, Kariya established discourse within manga as a pathway to potential resolution for victims of an ecological crisis.

Keywords
media, manga, comics, discourse ethics, environment, Japan

Introduction

In the spring of 2014, a Japanese comic author challenged his country's mainstream media narrative of the situation at Fukushima Prefecture, home to one of the world's worst-ever nuclear accidents (Kiger, 2013), with accounts of environmental damage and disturbing health consequences for local residents. The ensuing media controversy garnered the wrath of the country's prime minister and the attention of a nation still grappling with the 2011 disaster. This paper explores the ethical implications of such portrayals in a fictionalized, popular cultural medium—specifically, the Japanese comic *Oishinbo*—through the lens of Jürgen Habermas' discourse ethics. Against the backdrop of Japan's unique media landscape, Fukushima provides a particularly important site for discourse ethics. It is not only one of the world's worst environmental disasters historically, but it is also one that transpired in Japan's contemporary media and political climate. Habermas' assertion that justice is a more important outcome from discourse than a collective good challenges not only expected institutional resistance but also presumed or perceived existing societal norms in Japan. A methodology of ethical inquiry is used to analyze the case—including both the manga itself and the media discourse emanating from it. Japanese media outlets are examined to assess institutional reaction and debate.

Background

Like other environmental scenarios that share its scale and scope, Japan's 2011 Fukushima nuclear plant disaster created a global focal point for discussion about nuclear energy, and a notable forum for dissent. The incident, marked by the meltdown of three of the nuclear facility's reactors, is the largest nuclear incident since the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster of 1986 ("The Legacy of the Fukushima Nuclear Disaster," 2016). On the International Nuclear Event Scale, Fukushima has garnered a Level 7 measurement, the highest possible rating and indication of a "major event." Over 300,000 people were forced to evacuate the area in the days following the meltdown, in contrast to the evacuation of 14,000 residents in the case of Chernobyl. Given Japan's history with nuclear technology, in particular the atomic bombings of the cities of Hiroshima

and Nagasaki during the Second World War and subsequent debates in the decades following over the merits of nuclear energy, the events of Fukushima fostered a unique national trauma.

During the initial days, and indeed weeks, of the Fukushima incident, extensive global media coverage about the accident ran alongside a larger narrative about the tragic earthquake and tsunami that had devastated Japan and had triggered the nuclear accident. Coverage in the Japanese media—including the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, *Asahi Shimbun*, and *Mainichi Shimbun* newspapers, and television outlets such as national broadcaster NHK—was especially intense. Beyond details of the accident itself, ranging from coverage of the site's nuclear technology and infrastructure to the workers trying to contain the damage, one of the recurring themes both in Japan and globally was contrasting the benefits of nuclear energy with its inherent dangers. The incident occurred at a time when several nations—including the United States—were looking at scaling up their nuclear plant capacity to meet growing national energy needs. The essence of such debate was one of the economic versus the environmental and social: Was nuclear energy's economic upside ultimately worth the environmental and by extension societal cost? With the Japanese government and Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco) providing a plan for dealing with the crisis, and audience interest globally moving to other topics, media coverage began to eventually subside. To date, news coverage of the disaster often revolves around formal announcements from the Japanese government or Tepco, as well as key milestones or "news pegs" bridging to the event, such as when environmental activists have annually framed news reporting of the Hiroshima atomic bombing anniversary, pointing to Fukushima as a reminder of contemporary nuclear threats. Because of ongoing challenges in controlling the crisis, the extent of the damage from Fukushima is still not completely known, even several years after the initial meltdown. Mainstream media coverage in the 5 years since the Fukushima disaster has also been marked by a lack of focus on its health implications, in part because governments and corporations have been successful in framing media coverage (Pascale, 2017).

Despite marked decline in international mainstream media coverage of the Fukushima event (Landman, 2011), the accident has garnered significant interest in activist media. For example, Greenpeace has continued to monitor the impact of Fukushima on fish stocks across the Pacific Ocean. Environmental groups in North America have measured water and air quality impacts along the continent's West Coast. At the same time, the Fukushima disaster has garnered growing attention in popular culture and entertainment. The 2014 summer blockbuster movie *Godzilla*, for example, weighed in with its own symbolic messaging and moral narrative. In the Hollywood production, an out-of-control nuclear industry lies at the heart of a trail of destruction between Japan and North America. The story actually begins with a catastrophic accident

at a nuclear power plant caused by a major earthquake—providing a stark reminder of 2011 events. The juxtaposition of fictional Hollywood monsters onto an existing environmental calamity is nothing new, however. The horror movie *Silent Hill* invokes the real ghost town of Centralia, Pennsylvania, a once prospering coal mining town that had to be evacuated in the 1980s because of an underground coal fire—the worst in U.S. history—that continues to burn decades later (Kiger, 2013). Yet another Hollywood horror film based on the aftermath of environmental disaster, *The Chernobyl Diaries*, depicts the ill-fated journey of a group of young American sightseers to the Chernobyl disaster site, where they are terrorized by radioactive zombies who were created by the nuclear meltdown. Popular culture produced within Japan has not been as provocative with regard to Fukushima specifically, although the country has produced movies that reflect upon environmental and particularly nuclear disasters, such as Japanese cinematic productions of the Godzilla franchise. A reporter from *Reuters* wrote in 2014 that

> the nuclear disaster is a sensitive subject in Japan. Directors (in Japan) making mass-market films about Fukushima tiptoe into the debate or set their movies in an unspecified future. Sponsors are skittish and overall film revenues falling, with viewers shying away from anything too political. (Lies, 2014)

With that void identified, it should come as less of a surprise that within Japan, one of the most provocative and contentious fictional portrayals of the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster came from a relatively unlikely place: Manga, the Japanese-produced serial comics that are popular with both Japanese children and adults. Specifically, the manga-produced flashpoint was a special series devoted to Fukushima from the popular Japanese comic *Oishinbo*.

Manga and the Japanese Experience

As a form of visual communication, Japanese comic art draws from history, culture, politics, economy, and other social phenomena to reflect the reality of Japanese society, lifestyles, and nationhood (Ito, 2005). It blends an aesthetic of beauty, conflict, and the sensational with the verbal into a unified form of narrative, and in doing so blurs the line between high and low art (MacWilliams, 2014). Its visuals-heavy narrative approach creates a cinematic style that enables manga artists to develop storylines and characters with nuance and emotional depth—evoking at once the minutia of daily life and deeply moving memories and associations (Schodt, 2014). These visual and psychological connections to Japan's past and present, along with manga's focus on iconography, language, and political or social conditions have provided the genre with enduring popularity and mass appeal (Adamson, 2008).

In the years after the Second World War, manga creators not only depicted Japan's postwar reality but also they helped shape it through atomic-related popular storytelling—with heroes confronting not only villains but also suffering and tragedy (Szasz & Takechi, 2007). The manga *Barefoot Gen*, created by manga artist Keiji Nakazawa, is based loosely on the author's own experiences as a survivor of the 1945 Hiroshima atomic bombing. Manga author Osama Tezuka, who experienced the fire-bombings of Osaka while working at an army arsenal, had a deep mistrust of politicians and military leaders, but also of scientific knowledge and technology (Tanaka, 2010). He also drew from Japan's postwar experience, and in particular the proliferation of nuclear energy, for his series *Tetsuwan Atomu*, better known outside of Japan as *Astro Boy*. The serial manga provided the author with the opportunity to engage in philosophical debates about morality and social responsibility rather than simple formulas that appealed strictly to young children (Patten, 2004). *Barefoot Gen* and *Astro Boy* are but two examples of the elevated status of manga as a medium for airing political and social issues in the latter half of the 20th century. In 1995, Japan's prime minister went so far as to serialize his own column in the manga magazine *Big Comic Spirits*, thanks to the genre's mass appeal and ability to influence public opinion (Schodt, 2014).

Oishinbo and Fukushima

Alongside Japan's heightened interest in cuisine and cooking during the 1980s, and a proliferation of *gurume* (gourmet) manga, *Oishinbo* emerged instantly as the genre's most popular title and one of Japan's best selling across all manga genres (Brau, 2004)—with over 100 million copies sold worldwide since its 1983 debut. Translated into English for international audiences, the manga follows the exploits of food journalist Yamaoka Shiro, whose refined palate and unmatched culinary knowledge are juxtaposed against his quirky personality and lack of work ethic. The comic is produced by writer and essayist Tetsu Kariya and artist Akira Hanasaki. Through the lens of Yamaoka's fictionalized journalistic endeavors, the comic typically focuses on Japanese food and drink genres such as rice, sushi, or sake—but also explores international cuisines.

> Yamaoka is like a gastronomical Clark Kent: as a reporter, he is unremarkable and often outright lazy... But with food, he is unstoppable, flaking fish with a broken glass when a knife is too dull, or parading enough esoteric information about Japanese cooking to make even an expert jealous. (Schwartz, 2010)

Plots typically explain to readers the culinary, cultural, or environmental relevance of particular ingredients, and as a result they weigh regularly into political

or economic issues. For example, a storyline focused on the popular Japanese spirit of sake took exception to the government allowing liquor merchants to market sake combined with distilled alcohol as *authentic* (Kariya, 2009).

In 2014, the manga's author made the aforementioned decision to weigh in on the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster. The special series, entitled "The Truth about Fukushima," featured Yamaoka visiting Fukushima and meeting with a variety of local residents, including farmers, and learning about the ill effects of radiation exposure on the environment and communities. Yamaoka receives a stern warning from another character, modeled after a former mayor of the Fukushima community of Futaba, to not live there. He also suffers a nosebleed after visiting the destruction of the Fukushima No. 1 plant. While the environmental impacts of Fukushima have certainly been raised in the Japanese media, as well as the international media, the *Oishinbo* episode touched a national nerve in Japan, serving as a discussion point about the ongoing problems at the nuclear disaster site. The comic's depiction of the environment-induced nosebleed in particular received widespread media attention. At the same time, the series came under intense scrutiny from industry and government leaders, as well as media pundits, for what they deemed to be the irresponsible sensationalizing or falsifying of the situation at Fukushima. The controversy reached its crescendo when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe publicly criticized the comic and assuaged public fears about the situation at Fukushima.

As a result of the furor, the editors of the comic were forced to review scenes from the Fukushima series and issue a public apology; and on May 19, 2014, the manga ran a special section entitled "Criticisms and opinions on the installment of *Oishinbo*'s Fukushima's truth." This included letters of protest aimed at the manga from the Fukushima prefectural government, as well as the town of Futaba (Osaki, 2014). The manga was suspended by its publisher from further distribution, and there have been no new issues since. In the process, the controversy has attracted domestic and global media attention. "Outrage derails manga series '*Oishinbo*' for Fukushima nuclear crisis depiction" read one headline from the May 18 issue of the *Japan Times* (2014); the following day, the Huffington Post (2014) described how "Manga comic forces Japan to discuss radiation after Fukushima disaster." Social media debate also ensued on Twitter and Facebook. In an effort to counter the negative publicity stemming from the *Oishinbo* case, the prefecture of Fukushima produced a glossy YouTube video depicting the region in a more positive light. In the video, local residents are seen dancing around subway stations and shopping malls to the Pharell Williams song *Happy*. The video has enjoyed a popular reception, with nearly 1 million views to date. Its critics, however, have countered that the production has all the markings of government propaganda, or at least government-funded public relations, as opposed to an organic community production. But it's a reminder of how *Oishinbo* has set off a firestorm of debate in one of the world's most prosperous and otherwise politically stable countries.

Manga and Popular Culture as a Conduit for Social Issues

Comic books like manga act as a literary form to help communicate universal ideas and problems—including the ethical behavior of individuals, organizations such as businesses, as well as government institutions. Because of this, comic narratives are an ideal starting point for the discussion of ethical decision-making and social issues in the ethics classroom (Gerde & Foster, 2008). A case in point comes from the pages of *Archie*, the globally popular and long-running comic book series produced in the United States. The 2014 introduction and ongoing depiction of a gay character in the *Archie* comic franchise was met with some controversy but also accolades. However, the government of Singapore banned the sale of an *Archie* comic book for depicting a gay wedding on its cover (Jenkins, 2014). Since then, the death of the *Archie* character himself—while taking a bullet intended for his gay friend—set off a minor firestorm in the media, with the protagonist's idealized and simpler past in the fictional city of Riverdale juxtaposed against his (and the comic book's authors) confronting the social realities of 2014. A subsequent editorial from an Illinois newspaper conveyed not only annoyance but also, arguably, thinly veiled hostility with the *Archie* development:

> Yes we know this is all some sign of modern socially conscious something or other. But they killed *Archie*. That's just wrong . . . Archie and friends hardly ever dabbled in bigger issues that comic designers seem addicted to profiling. But when Issue 36 of "Life with *Archie*" went on sale this month, there was *Archie* dying, trying to stop an assassination of *Archie* Comics' first gay character, Kevin Keller, a military veteran and senator who favors increased gun control. Why? WHY? ("News-Sun Editorial: They Killed Archie", 2014)

The *Archie* case highlights comic books as popular culture once again serving as both ethical forum and conduit for political, economic, and societal debate. Its unique place in the United States popular culture pantheon closely parallels the influence manga enjoys in Japan.

Beyond Japan's borders, manga and anime have enjoyed longstanding influence in the United States and Europe. Darling-Wolf (2015) connects the development of France's visual culture to the influence of Japanese aesthetics, art, and fashion on the country, otherwise known as *Japonisme*. More contemporarily, to understand the importance of manga in a global context is to situate the literary form within the country's cultural and economic policy of "Cool Japan" (Brienza, 2014). Cool Japan is a government-sanctioned project that ties Japanese popular culture—including manga, but also prominent exports such as fashion, technology, and animation—to the success of its economic base, in particular its homegrown companies conducting business abroad

as multinational enterprises. Such a concept has its origins in the soft diplomacy theory of Joseph Nye, who argued that countries could and do achieve their goals through alternatives to military and economic means, such as communication and culture (Brienza, 2014). This concept was articulated specifically for Japan in *Foreign Policy* magazine by journalist Douglas McGray (2002, p. 48), and it came at a perfect time (Brienza, 2014): Japan was still in the throes of economic recession and concurrently was seeing the erosion of its global diplomatic power. Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was therefore quick to champion this vehicle of global influence. *Oishinbo* itself has been held up as a unique and mostly positive lens into Japanese society—with certain storylines revolving around food serving a broader purpose of showcasing Japan's rich and artisan-fueled culinary culture. At the same time, some narratives within the manga are imbued with critiques of trends such as food commercialization and industrialization—which give way to dishes that are less flavorful and less healthy (Brau, 2004). As much as *Oishinbo* reflects contemporary Japanese society and its challenges, more than anything the manga and its sometimes weighty storylines are the vision of the manga's author, Tetsu Kariya: "*Oishinbo* is an expression of his palate, his worldview, and his culinary knowledge" (Brau, 2004, p. 45).

That Kariya uses a fictional medium to relay views on real-world issues—from harmless food banter to potentially more contentious geopolitical, societal, and environmental commentary—is a sign that audiences of manga and by extension popular culture continue to consume such entertainment at a serious level. Just as critically acclaimed television shows such as *The Wire* and *Mad Men* have provided compelling entertainment forums for serious debate about racism, workplace bullying, institutional corruption, and capitalism, so Kariya has parlayed Japan's food obsession into an arena for debate about issues that extend well beyond the finer points of sushi, ramen, or rice wine. Reflecting upon the controversy over his manga in the aftermath of the Fukushima series, Kariya declared that "I can only write the truth." This assertion speaks to the tension in manga authorship between the provision of narratives based on fiction and those predicated upon what is deemed to be truth. The manga creator emerges here as both entertainer and journalist.

The contemporary era of digital media has accelerated the demarcation between journalism and other forms of information (such as fictionalized entertainment), where it is now difficult to determine who is a journalist or what types of information perform the roles of journalism (McBride & Rosenstiel, 2013, p. 90). For example, user-generated new media channels such as YouTube oscillate between entertainment and journalism roles. So too do many blogs, especially those moderated and produced by individuals as opposed to traditional news outlets. Even in mainstream media, the lines are blurred, with celebrity gossip programs like *TMZ* breaking stories that the traditional news media eventually follow. Documentary films, meanwhile, have proven to be a successful medium for fusing journalism, activism, and entertainment. Themes of social

justice have long been woven into the fabric of many contemporary punk rock, hip-hop, and folk music performances.

The artifacts of popular culture represent legitimate objects of analysis for scholars (Gans, 1999, p. xvi). Given its ideological, political, and economic underpinnings, it can also tell us more about society than it is given credit for (Wyatt & Bunton, 2012). By extension, popular culture is bound up in ethical implications and is in the position to influence those who consume it. That the manga's harshest critics took this episode so seriously is explained in part because the manga Fukushima series and ensuing controversy had manifested itself as a mainstream touchstone of societal influence and ethical debate.

Societal Responsibility and Habermas' Discourse Ethics

This study uses ethical inquiry to consider the case of *Oishinbo*'s Fukushima series—including both the manga itself and media discourse emerging from it. Ethical inquiry strives to understand and confirm statements about the justification of acts on behalf of individuals or social institutions (Adams, 1951). It raises questions related to both human behavior and the nature of ethical deliberation. It builds upon Dewey's (1957) assertion that knowledge is conceived as "the method of active control of nature and experience" (p. 122)—placing the scholar within the world, not apart from it (Roth, 2010). Thus, the *Oishinbo* comic and its ensuing media discourse emerge as the real-world site for inquiry focused on ethical action and outcomes. The usage of media texts helps illuminate the interplay between the transfer of information and the influence of human consciousness (Entman, 1993). Qualitatively, "even a single unillustrated appearance of a notion in an obscure part of the text can be highly salient, if it comports with the existing schemata in a receiver's belief systems" (p. 53).

Articles appearing in May, 2014 from two Japanese media outlets, *The Japan Times* and *Asahi Shimbun,* are examined to assess institutional reaction and debate. These were identified through searches of the words "Oishinbo," "Fukushima," "manga," and "Tetsu Kariya" in different combinations via the search engine of Google, as well as the publication's own search engines. The time period of May is chosen to reflect dialogue generated after the special issues of the comic were published on the dates of April 28, 2014 and May 12, 2014 (Figure 1).

Both the *Japan Times* and *Asahi Shimbun* meet key criteria for this inquiry: They have national or international profiles, their archival texts are made available digitally, and both publications are made available in English. The Tokyo-based *Japan Times* is Japan's oldest English-language newspaper. It was launched in 1897 with the goal of providing a venue for Japanese readers to discuss news and current events in English, and to foster international engagement between Japan and an international readership (Kamiya, 2011). In addition to its daily broadsheet, the publication is provided in weekly tabloid

Figure 1. The May 12, 2014 edition of *Oishinbo* dealt with health outcomes for residents living near the Fukushima nuclear facility. Nosebleeds suffered by the manga's protagonist Yamaoko set off a national debate about the disaster's impacts on citizens and the role of the comic (from Nippon.com/Jiji Press).

format, as well as the *Japan Times* website, which receives 7.5 million page-views per month. It is also a partner with the *International New York Times*. The Osaka-based *Asahi Shimbun* is one of Japan's oldest and best-read newspapers, with individual daily readership of over 17 million. It makes translated stories available in English via *AJW (Asia & Japan Watch)*, the digital edition of the *Asahi Shimbun*. The newspaper is considered more liberal and left-of-center compared to other conservative national newspapers in the country. In combination, these two publications provide stories about Japan's national affairs written originally in Japanese and English. As texts for the site of ethical inquiry, they provide important elements for the researcher: commentary and opinion from political actors, narrative and analysis, and fact-based reporting that chronicles the sequence of events. Furthermore, as national publications with large readerships, they provide coverage that reflects broader media discourses in Japan.

A total of six articles are identified from the two publications. Five of these articles were published in the *Japan Times*; while one was retrieved from the *Asahi Shimbun*. It is important to include the *Asahi Shimbun* article alongside the *Japan Times* texts because of its qualitative richness and role in subsequent appearances in other mainstream and social media articles. This includes quotes and official comments from the central government's top spokesperson, the Fukushima prefectural government, the president of Fukushima University, the mayor of Osaka, the former mayor of Futaba in Fukushima Prefecture, the creator and publisher of *Oishinbo*, as well as Fukushima residents. In their entirety, the six articles featured prominently not only within their respective publications. They were also quoted or republished in hundreds of website articles, blogs, and social media messages and became the source for further reporting in international news websites.

At the heart of the *Oishinbo* Fukushima case is the role of an intermediary and producer of public information, in this case an entertainment or popular culture medium, in balancing the interests of society at large with the direct well-being of residents from Fukushima Prefecture. The latter, some might argue, were once again victimized—at both societal and economic levels—by the *Oishinbo* commentary and depictions. This would be the case especially for civic and business boosters who would like to see the region enjoy a full recovery to its former prosperity. On the other hand, some residents welcomed the manga, shedding light as it did on a very real situation of nosebleeds (among other health issues real or perceived) in the area (McCurry, 2014). At a macro level, antinuclear activists and a handful of global media voices have taken exception to the lack of transparency of Tepco and the Japanese government in the wake of the disaster. Other activists have taken aim at the corporate media for allegedly downplaying international dangers stemming from the disaster fallout (Smith, 2014).

In short, the controversy is murky and rife with ethical challenges. All of this is to say that Jürgen Habermas' discourse ethics theory is well situated to analyze this complex case, in spite of the eventual and well-documented suspension of the *Oishinbo* comic. While "discourse ethics" has evolved into what is more accurately described as "a discourse theory of morality," the theory's founder has chosen to remain with the former description because of its established usage; and it assertion that justice is a more important outcome than a common good or happiness (Habermas, 1993, pp. vii, 150). To achieve this justice, Habermas argued in favor of a public moral discourse that is free of power imbalances, and one in which the superior argument for society as a whole ultimately prevails. It explicitly includes as participants of argumentation all those affected by a norm (Hoenisch, 2005). This is exactly what *Oishinbo*'s author Tetsu Kariya wanted to accomplish by giving voice to the affected residents of Fukushima who were not being heard. In a well-publicized defense of his publication, *Oishinbo* editor-in-chief Hiroshi Murayama (who had the final

say in whether to approve the comic's contentious perspectives or not) stated as much in an afterword in which "he writes of feeling a strong pang of responsibility for the outrage caused by the recent issues of the manga" (Osaki, 2014, para. 2):

> It's wrong to ignore the voices of those people just because these are considered in the minority and likely to unsettle others. As editor in chief, I decided Kariya's viewpoint was worth presenting to readers for their opinions. (Osaki, 2014, para. 7)

Murayama's assertion should be considered in light of the centrality of access within public discourse, and how such freedom of access positions it differently from institutionalized arrangements such as government hearings, university seminars, or parliamentary debates:

> Anyone who seriously engages in argumentation must presuppose that the context of discussion guarantees in principle freedom of access, equal rights to participate, truthfulness on the part of participants, absence of coercion in adopting positions, and so on . . . This must be distinguished from the institutional arrangements that obligate specific groups of people to engage in argumentation . . . (Habermas, 1993, p. 31)

Such exposure was especially vital in light of what was happening in Japan's news industry, where press freedom had deteriorated due to a recently passed state secrets bill designed to reduce government transparency on key issues such as nuclear energy and U.S. relations (World Press Freedom Index, 2014). This came on top of a newsroom environment in Japan where journalists were discouraged from questioning official sources—what one Japanese journalist dubbed "announcement journalism" (Harnett, 2014). For nonaccredited journalists, the situation was more troubling. "Arrests, home searches, interrogation by the domestic intelligence agency and threats of judicial proceedings—who would have thought that covering the aftermath of the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster would have involved so many risks for Japan's freelance journalists?" asked the press freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders (World Press Freedom Index, 2014).

Amid this environment, *Oishinbo* provided an albeit contentious forum for individuals—namely audiences of the comic and ensuing media stories about it—to ultimately ask of their government and industry leaders important questions about the environmental and health hazards at Fukushima. In concrete terms, this started with a flurry of social media activity on venues such as Twitter and Facebook, which spilled out into the mainstream media. The *Asahi Shimbun* published one tweet from a Japanese teacher by the name of Junichi—retweeted over 10,000 times—expressing a hope that "this serves as an opportunity to have more people know more about the reality in Fukushima

through an examination of the contentious points, rather than cover up various arguments'' (Takahashi & Negishi, 2014). The comic, as described by the *Japan Times*, had ''set off a hot public debate in Japan — a nation still traumatized by the world's worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl'' (Kageyama, 2014, para. 2). Katstaka Idogawa, the former mayor of Futaba, uploaded photos to his personal (and public) Facebook page showing himself with visual evidence of the nosebleeds he was enduring post-Fukushima incident, specifically bloodied tissues set atop dated post-it notes (Kendall, 2014). Here, the articulated localized perspective of Fukushima's health impacts emerges as the moral point of view described in Habermas' discourse ethics, one situated ''within the communication framework of a community of selves'' (Cavalier, Mellon, & Ess, 2006, para. 1).

Public discourse also reflected the backlash against this advocacy for local residents. One Twitter user, claiming to be a resident of the central Fukushima Prefecture city of Koriyama, attested to having ''never suffered such symptoms over the past three years'' (Anime News Network, 2014, para. 2). The message was retweeted over 13,000 times. The president of Fukushima University, meanwhile, issued a statement reminding faculty members ''to act and speak after thoroughly understanding their position''—this after an associate professor had appeared in Kariya's comic under his own name, raising health, and livability issues for residents (Takahashi & Negishi, 2014). Even the mayor of the relatively distant metropolis of Osaka weighed in, as the comic depicted health problems in that city stemming from the local incineration of Fukushima rubble. As reported in the *Asahi Shimbun*, he argued that Kariya ''went overboard with the depiction that has no basis in fact'' (Takahashi & Negishi, 2014). The ruckus arguably reached its crescendo when Japan's Prime Minister weighed in with his own criticism, threatening to make a ''best effort to take action against such baseless rumors'' and arguing that there was no link between radiation and some of the health symptoms alluded to by the publication (Kageyama, 2014). Such government interference should be considered alongside Habermas' assertion that the degree of a society's liberality hinges upon institutional expressions that are noncoercive and nonauthoritarian, giving way to an autonomous morality that takes on a life of its own (Habermas, 1993, p. 171). Far from being emboldened by institutional support of such discourse, Shogakukan, *Oishinbo*'s publisher, followed up the first wave of debate with the publication of a special 10-page segment to its weekly *Big Comic Spirits* magazine. The publication featured opinions and criticism from various leaders and experts. At this stage of the exchange between various parties, the key principles of discourse ethics (Cavalier et al., 2006; Habermas, 1990) are achieved: All affected parties—a balancing of interests—are included in the discourse; their universal participation and acceptance are required for the emergence of universally valid norms; and consensus is contingent upon free and willing participation.

The application of a fully realized Habermasian discourse ethics in the case of *Oishinbo's* treatment of Fukushima was ultimately mitigated by suspension of the publication. However, it is the act of creating a forum in the first place—for unheard voices, and hitherto unknowing publics—that certainly qualifies as Habermasian in spirit and practice. Ethics discourse was conceived by Habermas as the "procedure through which persons can live up to the imperative of the moral principle" (Heller, 1985). To this end, *Oishinbo* helped create a new forum for debate about the conditions at Fukushima, something that was sorely lacking in the mainstream news media. By putting the conditions of the site into his manga and ultimately into the national media spotlight—creating a demand for greater accountability—Kariya put more responsibility for the future of Fukushima back into the hands of the citizenry, as opposed to decision-making taking place by government and corporate institutions without public consultation. For a democratic constitutional monarchy such as Japan where a social responsibility to publics is assumed, this is a necessary outcome even if it is less economically efficient and less politically expedient.

The ensuing suspension of the manga comic does not undermine the framework of discourse ethics. Rather, it exposes the vulnerabilities of discourse ethics in terms of operationalizing it for practical societal discourse. Those scholars who have attempted to move discourse ethics into organizational life have noted its limitations, primarily that it is seen as too utopian and idealistic. Yet its positive features—the emphasis on universalism, its comprehensive recognition of ethical and pragmatic issues within a fractured world—make the realization of discourse ethics a goal worth striving for (Mingers, 2009). The suspension of the publication here provides an important juxtaposition between suppressed debate and the inclusion of all voices. The suspended manga also emerges a symbol for those whose voices are left unheard. In this sense, the unruly discourse generated by *Oishinbo*, and its subsequent cessation, should not be viewed through a lens of success and failure. Rather, it should assess what Shah (2013) refers to as the conditions of discourse that make citizen action possible.

Some scholars have cautioned away from a Habermasian approach to public engagement—at least for organizations—in favor of more pragmatic and strategic approaches, especially in the realms of stakeholder engagement and strategic management (Noland & Phillips, 2010). Public discourse can be a messy thing. Certainly in the eyes of many, the *Oishinbo* Fukushima series was anything but strategic—and Kariya himself has not said anything about his vision for his contended comic beyond giving voice to the unheard living near the disaster site.

Another perspective that potentially undermines the publisher comes from its self-inflicted suspension of *Oishinbo* and its ultimate effect on public discourse. An earlier case that also culminated in the permanent suspension of a magazine provides a perspective that is unique to Japan. The publication of a Holocaust-denying article in 1995 resulted in the swift termination of the 250,000

circulation *Marco Polo* magazine by Japanese publishing giant Bungei Shunju, an unprecedented action that surprised both its supporters and its critics (Brislin, 1996). This begs the question of whether such a move suppresses public discourse or conversely can itself influence public opinion disproportionately by giving rise to hostility toward government or industry censorship.

> . . . was the killing of the magazine a symbolic seppuku—ritual suicide as the ultimate apology—on the part of Bungei Shunju, or was it more of a case of cosmetic surgery—to rid the publishing house of what had become an increasingly irritating, unsightly, and unprofitable, lesion on its otherwise respectable product and record? Was the action face-saving or spiting? (Brislin, 1996)

Such history is a reminder that the suspension of Kariya's manga requires an analysis that is attuned to conflicting government, business, and artistic considerations. As a result, both *Oishinbo* and *Marco Polo* have come to share a double-edged legacy in Japanese publishing. But to initiate the argumentation process, even at the risk of suspension of publication and public rebuttal by the country's prime minister underscores both commitment and a sense of public duty by the manga's creators. At the same time, it is worthwhile to maintain—as with other discourse ethics cases—a focus on the relationship between justice and good, as it relates to the good of a nation, a community, or an individual (Rehg, 1997, p. 5). In his contemplation of Habermas' theory, Rehg (1997) argues that "unless discourse ethics can give a plausible account of justification and application in relation to the good, it will fall victim to the difficulties that have plagued deontological moral theories since Kant" (p. 5). Both the editor-in-chief and creator of *Oishinbo*, by connecting their actions to a transcendental purpose of giving voice to a marginalized constituency (as opposed to a short-sighted motivation grounded in personal or financial gain), have made discourse as a pathway to conflict resolution very much possible. Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's six stages of moral development, the most widely used theory in the realm of moral development, was intended to be applied beyond the micro-morality between family, friends, and strangers to a more macro-moral landscape that includes institutions, the law, and society at large (Coleman & Wilkins, 2009, p. 42). Through this lens, addressing the decidedly negative long-term and macro-economic implications of a nuclear disaster take precedence over the emotional well-being of impacted residents and any kind of short-term economic or tourism boost for affected communities. *Oishinbo* writer Kariya, who spent two years researching the situation and made multiple visits to the site of the nuclear disaster, said himself that as author he was not about to "write that Fukushima was safe and all was well—even if that may be what people wanted to hear" (Kageyama, 2014). Paramount here in Kariya's words—published in the *Japan Times* and other news publications—is understanding the motivation behind Kariya's action: to sound the alarm over the troubling environmental and

social reality in the prefecture. In an endnote of the special issue, he argued "it's wrong to ignore the voices of those people just because these are considered in the minority and likely to unsettle others" (Osaki, 2014, para. 7). In depicting a post-Fukushima environment, Kariya's motivations occurred at Kohlberg's highest stage, the postconventional, in which laws and social order are respected and adhered to as long as they are congruent with universal ethics and principles. Such a stage was illustrated by Coleman and Wilkins (2009) by using the irrefutable example of Martin Luther King, who defied the laws of the 1960s that unjustly discriminated against African-Americans. *Oishinbo*'s Fukushima narrative is not nearly as cut-and-dry for a postconventional description, however—given that the environmental verdict of the disaster is still being debated within the scientific community, and that *Oishinbo*'s unproven assertions were published in a fictional account of the situation. Such analysis can also be held up for criticism by Carol Gilligan's (1977) ethics of care argument—especially in Japan. That is, *Oishinbo* as an entertainment institution in Japan might have also considered the emotional and economic well-being of the residents of Fukushima Prefecture before holding this region up to special and arguably unfair scrutiny. However, such an argument—completely justifiable in the right setting—could also be appropriated by government and business institutions hoping to quash debate for other reasons steeped in profit or power motivation. Indeed, this has fueled at least some of the skepticism around the YouTube success of the Fukushima *Happy* video. Furthermore, the sheer enormity of such a nuclear accident allows us to contextualize the debate as the short-term interests of the relative few versus Japanese society at large and indeed the global population.

Conclusion

The application of Habermas' discourse ethics provides an opportunity to retrospectively analyze the argumentation arising from the *Oishinbo* saga in conjunction with environmental justice but also to weigh the broader implications for Japanese society in light of ongoing nuclear energy debates. In considering the ethical complexities of the enormous environmental and societal conflicts within Japan that the Fukushima disaster represents, it is tempting to position them within characterizations of Japan's focus on the collective and embrace of social harmony—sometimes at the expense of unrestrained individual expression. Such a view, concurrent with Carol Gilligan's ethics of care perspective, sees much of Japan's social and cultural success historically and during the modern era as stemming from a national, collectivist spirit. The expression "ganbatte kudasai," which translates into "do your best" or "hang in there," has been applied to everything from cheering on Japan's postrecession economy to galvanizing the country's revered professional baseball teams. More recently, it has been delivered as a mantra to victims of Japan's 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear

disaster, even if such advice has been perceived as less than adequate in the face of personal devastation. Yet Kariya's actions potentially undermine such a dominant national narrative. The tension between the desire for collective harmony and need for individual or nonharmonious expression has fueled Japan's unique expressions and storylines within popular culture, from popular music and films to books and comics. Discourse ethics emphasize justice and rights over happiness or a common good, but Habermas argues that they also fuse these polarizing outcomes:

> Justice and solidarity are two sides of the same coin because practical discourse is, on the one hand, a procedure that affords everyone the opportunity to influence the outcome with his "yes" or "no" responses and therefore takes account of an individualistic understanding of equality; on the other hand, practical discourse leaves intact the social bond that induces participants in argumentation to become aware of their membership in an unlimited communication community. (Habermas, 1993, p. 154)

This study, then, contributes to understanding Habermas' discourse ethics in a non-Western context and shows how individual moral action aligns with the ethical aspirations of the collective. Despite the backlash from institutions—chiefly government, companies, and some media—Kariya's actions served to widen the debate over health threats emanating from the Fukushima disaster, while casting a light on those communities facing real and potential consequences from this calamity.

Future research might explore this case and others like it through the lens of other countries such as the United States similarly impacted by large-scale ecological and environmental crises. Here too, Habermas offers a compelling framework for examining cases from across the Pacific Rim and a universalist perspective. Within discourse ethics, what constitutes the moral basis of social cooperation is a question with global implications:

> The conflicts that arise today, both within and between nations, pose an increasingly acute problem of cooperation. These conflicts involve not only economic, technological, and ecological issues but moral ones as well. At stake often enough are human rights, or questions of freedom, equality, fair treatment and so on. Thus an adequate resolution to such conflicts must respect the legitimate claims of different individuals and groups without destroying the complex bonds that link these individuals and groups, all their differences notwithstanding. (Rehg, 1997, p. 1)

In Japan, such an adequate resolution has yet to be located. Far from reaching any kind of societal consensus, a fictionalized manga publication has been suspended and stigmatized in the face of government pressure and negative media coverage for raising the possibility of adverse health impacts in a nuclear disaster

zone. More recently, Kariya has pondered aloud the termination of *Oishinbo*, which would position the Fukushima series as the point of no return for a manga franchise with a 30-year history. Meanwhile, the true environmental impacts of the 2011 meltdown are still not completely known. In spite of what appears to be a dire situation, the long-term prospects for the *Oishinbo* controversy appear more promising. The manga set off what the *Japan Times* described as ''a hot public debate in Japan—a nation still traumatized by the world's worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl.''

While *Oishinbo* author Tetsu Kariya was surprised by outrage stemming from his special Fukushima series, he was adamant that his two years of researching the nuclear disaster site would not give way to a false sense of hope. To recall his blunt assessment of *Oishinbo*'s role, published on his blog: ''I can only write the truth.'' Dismissed by his critics as a profiteer or a mere ''food manga artist,'' he refused to back away from his view on the environmental dangers associated with the Fukushima aftermath. Buoyed by increasing public debate and growing journalistic scrutiny, discourse ethics emerges as a necessary but sometimes brutal process with crucial environmental and social justice implications not only within Japan's borders but indeed globally.

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The Producer as Fan: Forensic Fandom and *The Good Wife*

Chandler Harriss[1]

Abstract

Jason Mittell argues that contemporary television narrative is marked by degrees of both structural and consumptive complexity. One way he addresses this complexity is through the concept of drillability, which he describes as "a mode of forensic fandom that invites viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling." This essay analyzes a particular episode of CBS's *The Good Wife* (2009–2016) to extend Mittell's concept of drillability and to explore its theoretical links to Mikhail Bakhtin's "dialogic imagination." In doing so, the essay argues that "producer-fans" model modes of critical media consumption required by an informed and engaged citizenry.

Keywords

drillability, fandom, narrative complexity, dialogic theory, intertextuality, *The Good Wife*

Introduction

Jason Mittell (2015) suggests that the complexity marking contemporary television's narrative structures creates opportunities for fans to engage with texts more deeply. Drawing on David Bordwell (1985), he conceptualizes complexity as a "historically distinct set of norms of narrational construction and

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comprehension'' (Mittell, 2015, Complexity in Context, para. 2). One concept he introduces in relation to this complexity is *drillability*, which he defines as ''a mode of forensic fandom that invites viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling'' (Mittell, 2015, Orienting and Drilling, para. 2). He illustrates this mode of engagement by noting the ways sports fans collect information about their favorite teams or players by ''drilling down statistically and collecting artifacts'' or the ways *Battlestar Galactica* fans create wikis and blogs to develop and expand ''the show's mythology'' (Mittell, 2015, Orienting and Drilling, para. 2).

Given the multilayered and multidirectional textual flows that characterize complex television narratives, in particular, it seems logical that drillability applies not only to the behaviors of audiences but also to the ways that *producers* operate (either subconsciously or consciously) as fans. A substantial body of research details fans acting as producers (see, e.g., Jenkins 1992, 2006; Mittell, 2012, 2015); yet, there is minimal scholarship exploring the converse. The current study takes Matt Hills' (2013) rejection of the ''producer/fan binary'' as its starting point and responds to Hills' call for scholarship promoting a ''dialectical synthesis of these essentializing positions'' (p. 150). To accomplish this task, the theoretical links between Mittell's concept of drillability and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism are investigated via an analysis of the ''Infamy'' (S01.11) episode of CBS's *The Good Wife* (*TGW*; 2009–2016). The purpose of this analysis is to illuminate examples of producerly ''drilling'' while illustrating how media professionals leverage their fandom to construct deep, nuanced media texts that serve as ''drillable'' sites for fan engagement. As a rich intertext that participates dialogically and discursively with a range of ideological apparatuses, *TGW* provides a fertile space worthy of both textual and consumptive exploration.

Televisual narratives are frequently characterized by ''intertextual flows,'' Mittell's phrase for the multifaceted and multidirectional interactions occurring between producers, audiences, and texts. Writing about intertextuality, Jonathan Gray (2006) notes, ''Texts do not just work by themselves, in a vacuum, conducting a solitary discussion with their audiences. Rather, texts and texts, texts and audiences, are constantly in dialogue, responding to, predicting, interrupting, ridiculing, supporting, or undercutting each other's messages'' (p. 173). As Mittell and Gray suggest, the text is but one part of a complex and dialogic process, and while texts remain as fruitful analytic locations, there is much to learn by analyzing these texts in order to infer behaviors. These behaviors, when isolated and articulated, reveal consumptive practices that fans can mimic and adopt. In effect, *TGW*'s producers do not simply create escapist entertainment products, but instead they construct nuanced and sweeping cultural critiques.

TGW's showrunners, Robert and Michelle King, are news fans who clearly mine the genre's headlines and topics for inspiration. In doing so, the televisual texts they generate include veins of intertextual connections and corresponding

cultural meanings that, when aggregated, produce transtextual and dialogic maps (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981; Genette, 1997). These veins cut beneath the surface of the core text spreading outward as the narrative engages not only with *TGW's* audience but with other texts, audiences, and discourses as well. *TGW*'s producers use the "Infamy" episode as a platform to parody, satirize, and criticize cable news. As such, analysis of this episode provides insights not only about the ways producer fandom informs and structures such critiques, but how these texts and producers are dialogically and culturally situated. As Bakhtin and Holquist (1981) observes:

> The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and rejoinder to it – it does not approach the object from the sidelines. (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981, Discourse in Poetry and Discourse in the Novel, para. 8)

Put simply, communication never occurs in a vacuum and hence is understood only in relation to prior and future communication. Moreover, communication is not simply a series of messages but is instead a complex set of ideologically laden practices and behaviors.

Drillability, Spreadability, and Dialogism

Mittell coined drillability to expand Henry Jenkins' spreadability. As Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) explain, "'Spreadability' refers to the potential – both technical and cultural – for audiences to share content for their own purposes..." (p. 3). Spreadability focuses on how content moves along a horizontal axis as fans use technological tools to recast, repurpose, reimagine, and extend the reach of the texts they enjoy. In contrast, drillability suggests that this extension and expansion may also occur along a vertical axis as fans add depth and heft by creating, maintaining, and participating within paratextual spaces like message boards, blogs, or wikis. Both spreadability and drillability tend to focus on the openness and accessibility provided to amateur fans by newer media innovations; however, there is no reason to relegate these activities to amateurs or newer media forms since professionals often use traditional media like movies, television, and print in strikingly similar ways.

While drilling leads spectators more deeply into the core text and the storyworld, it also leads them beyond its boundaries as they become immersed within the intertextual flows Mittell describes. All audience members possess the capacity to dialogically connect texts together because all audience members are

immersed in worlds of shared experience. As Bakhtin and Holquist (1981) notes, "Only the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word, could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the object" (Bakhtin & Holquist, Discourse in Poetry and Discourse in the Novel, para. 14). The intersections between the *real* and fictional produce a complex set of associations from which meaning and pleasure emerge. Part of the pleasure associated with viewing contemporary television programs is found in "modes of engagement," which would include the enhanced abilities to drill into a television episode or plotline to determine if it has been inspired by a "real-world" event (Mittell, 2012, 2015).

As producers devote themselves to exploring content, they find inspiration in much the same way as their fans. They then, like their fans, add depth and breadth to the content that seized their interest, which often results in an intergeneric amalgamation that blurs the lines separating the historical world from the fictional storyworld. Horace Newcomb (1984) addresses intergeneric blending as he writes, "Dialogue within genres, however, pales in comparison to the dialogue *among* genres...[T]elevision depends on the physical proximity of generic patterns, the immediate availability of generic shift" (p. 43). This dialogue among and between genres creates opportunities for one text to criticize and connect with others.

It is this type of borrowing that defines one of *TGW*'s intrinsic norms as elements from the historical world regularly appear within its storyworld. The Kings accomplish this by taking a familiar news story or entity and recasting it within the program's creative language and style. For example, Google becomes Chub Hub or characters like Peter Florrick (Chris Noth) are constructed with thinly veiled references to historical world figures like Eliot Spitzer and Bill Clinton. The incorporation of these elements evidence the content that the Kings and their team consume. More importantly, they provide themselves and their fans with specific sites and moments of interaction. Or, as John Fiske (1987) notes, "Intertextual knowledges pre-orient the reader to exploit television's polysemy by activating the text in certain ways, that is, by making some meanings rather than others" (p. 108). This preorientation creates opportunities for producers to defamiliarize the source text as they hail audiences to revisit and reconsider their pre-formed opinions and ideological positions. In the case of "Infamy," the episode stands as an example of a "double-voiced" text (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1981). It is a pastiche in which the characters embody the producers' voices as they communicate to and about cable news, its cultural position, and its social roles. It then becomes incumbent upon audiences to develop capacities that allow them to make the appropriate connections in order to fully comprehend not only the text but also the intertexts it references. As Gray (2006), echoing Bakhtin, notes, "Effectively, every utterance reaches us lifeless with thousands of protruding wires. For that utterance to make sense, for

it to come alive, we must hook it up to active wires already possessed'' (p. 25). Concepts like drillability and spreadability, then, are merely manifestations of the dialogic activities involved in *hooking up the wires*.

In this light, *TGW*'s producers are not merely media creators; they are also consumers. Describing the writing team as ''news junkies,'' Ted Humphrey, a long-time *TGW* staff writer, says, ''We're constantly emailing one another if we've found some sort of interesting tidbit in the law or the news. We meet every day, all day long'' (Locker, 2015). The Kings spoke of these behaviors during a 2013 panel with Emily Nussbaum of *The New Yorker*. Nussbaum asked the couple about the inspirations for their plotlines. Robert King responded by saying that writing often involves ''a fair amount of procrastination'' and that one of the ways he procrastinates is by escaping into other media texts (*The New Yorker Videos,* 2013). As he escapes, he discovers topics that might play well within the storyworld. He goes on to suggest that part of his goal as a writer is to identify those stories that have not yet broken into mainstream consciousness. In essence, King suggests that his own media fandom often intertwines with his professional obligations. Moreover, he details the ways in which he serves his industry by promoting and commenting on the media products he consumes.

''Infamy'' clearly illustrates a keen awareness of and familiarity with cable news, one of the media entities that should help produce a more informed and knowledgeable populace. However, it seems clear that the Kings believe cable news is neither consistently nor adequately fulfilling this cultural obligation. To frame their critique, the writers drill into a specific and identifiable presentation of a cable news story. They then appropriate that story as a way to condemn the cable news industry and its associative practices. This condemnation requires collaboration and collective operation. In this way, their team of writers, legal consultants, sound designers, videographers, and graphic artists function quite similarly to the fan communities described by Jenkins, whose work details how members of fan communities leverage their occupational expertise as part of their escapist pursuits, and in doing so aggregate a ''collective intelligence'' whereby the community becomes more knowledgeable than its individual parts (Jenkins, 2006). If viewers identify and recognize professionalized fan practices and behaviors, then perhaps they can locate the personal benefits of such engagement. Moreover, developing an awareness of the medium's conventions, both stylistic and industrial, will aid viewers as they attempt to realize these benefits.

Conventional Dialogues

The production team's consumptive experiences and sources of inspiration are revealed almost immediately in the ''Infamy'' episode, which launches by immersing viewers in a fictional cable news show called ''Gimme Some Truth with Duke Roscoe.'' Like Peter, Duke Roscoe (Craig Bierko) represents an

amalgamation of familiar cable news personalities that viewers likely recognize. Personalities like Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity, and Rush Limbaugh clearly inform the character. Roscoe is a self-righteous know-it-all who uses his cable news slot as a pulpit from which to preach his brand of legal and political certainty. He wraps himself in the First Amendment and enjoys journalistic freedoms—even if he is not a journalist in the traditional sense.

While he comes across as an embittered White male conservative, his outward appearance masks the historical world personality he represents most directly—the former host of a Headline News program, Nancy Grace. Grace is situated within Roscoe in two key ways. First, she hails from Macon, Georgia, linking her to the character's regionalized name, which undoubtedly draws from a combination of characters found in the 1980s primetime action drama *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979–1985). *The Dukes of Hazzard*, set in Hazzard County, Georgia, revolves around the stories of Bo and Luke Duke and their interactions with their constant foil, Sheriff Rosco P. Coltrane. Time and again, these Southern boys challenge power structures as they work on the fringes of the law to establish their own sense of truth and order—a characteristic shared by Roscoe. Secondly and more directly, in 2006 Grace interviewed Melinda Duckett, the mother of a missing 2-year-old boy. During this interview, Grace accused Duckett of murdering her son. Duckett committed suicide the day after that interview, which led her family to file a civil suit that was eventually settled. *TGW* bases "Infamy's" Cheryl Willens plotline on that case and uses it to criticize Grace's on-air demeanor and cable news more generally.

The Kings, like spoiling communities Jenkins observes, rely on collaborative efforts and the expertise of many people working within specific creative spheres. In doing so, they reflexively expose cable news' aural and visual conventions. "Infamy's" opening scene encourages audiences to recognize the role editing plays as they watch one of the law firm's name partners, Diane Lockhart (Christine Baranski), direct the structuring of a news clip for her case. She, like cable news producers, makes editorial decisions about what her audience will see and hear. The scene plays out this way:

> DIANE: Shorter clips. Make it shorter clips. Grab the attention of the jury.
> ROSCOE (from the clip): Cheryl Willens killed her baby and I have learned the reason Ms. Willens was in the store at all. To buy condoms.
> DIANE: We don't need that. Just cut it off at "killed her baby."
> ROSCOE (from the clip)...Cheryl Willens' freedom. The murdering mom took her own life (a noose graphic drops over OTS footage of Willens' body as it is wheeled out on a gurney) hanging herself from her closet door.

This scene reflexively calls attention to production techniques. The clip—which members of the art, effects, and sound departments assuredly shaped—satirizes and parodies cable news and its pundits by rendering a familiar set of visuals and

sounds strange and absurd. The presence of two over-the-shoulder graphics, the waving American flag wallpaper, a crawl, and the inclusion of dramatic music, all amplify a shift away from information and toward entertainment, also marking a shift away from civic duty and toward revenue generation. These stylistic choices simultaneously define and condemn contemporary cable news as this segment's creation was likely informed by *The Colbert Report* (2005–2015), a satiric and parodic representation of FOX News. Stephen Colbert's production team regularly overemphasized patriotic imagery and sound beds as a way to highlight the not-so-subtle persuasive techniques employed by programs like *The O'Reilly Factor*. Dialogically, the scene suggests a complex and intertextual web by referencing a program that references other programs. More importantly, by borrowing from and reinforcing a satiric representation, the producers align themselves in opposition to cable news.

Producers as (Anti)Fans

As a genre, news is not something devoted consumers always like or love. Gray (2003) observes the existence of both "positive" and "negative" fans as he argues for a recognition of anti-fans, whom he defines as "those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel" (p. 70). Put differently, the anti-fan's pleasure derives from oppositional readings and condemnation rather than blind acceptance and exaltation. Vivi Theodoropoulo (2007) suggests antifandom is inextricably connected to fandom. She writes, "Anti-fans do not dislike popular texts for nothing. On the contrary, they are often familiar with their objects of dispassion and aware of the reasons for their dislike" (Theodoropoulo, 2007, p. 317). She goes on to say that anti-fans are always fans, but it is her observation that anti-fans work to protect their fan objects from "counterforces" that best accounts for the way cable news is critically positioned within "Infamy."

As noted, the devoted news consumption and generic mining engaged in by *TGW*'s writers is not only a means of avoiding the drudgery of the job but also a playful escape into a genre they genuinely enjoy. The focus on genre is important because it highlights the existence of levels of fandom. Theodoropoulo's work explores fans of different Greek football teams. In doing so, she illustrates how fans of one team become anti-fans of another. However, she glosses over a commonality that binds the two distinct groups, which is that both are football fans. Put differently, fandom and anti-fandom operate in various degrees and at different levels. In the case of *TGW*'s writers, they are fans of the news genre but not fans of all news programs. In fact, they might function as anti-fans of some news programs, and it is this variability that creates opportunities to identify and condemn the "counterforces" that threaten the genre, which in turn blurs the lines separating work from fandom. Moreover, producer-fans and critics share many traits as both tend to merge work with play. Put simply, many media critics

choose their critical targets by virtue of a preexisting devotion to a particular type of text. As critics undertake their work, they are prone to exalt examples they feel represent the targets of their fandom positively while condemning those they feel do not. In other words, the work of critics resembles both the anti-fan's desire to protect fan objects from "counterforces" and the fan's desire to demonstrate and generate devotion and servitude. Ultimately, fandom, like criticism, moves back and forth along a spectrum of affinity and disdain.

As *TGW*'s writers consume news, they discover, reveal, digest, and recast topics that interest them and they believe will interest their viewers. This type of recasting and re-encoding demonstrates the need to reconsider Stuart Hall's (2001) encoding/decoding model in the way that Gray suggests. Gray (2003) proposes that Hall's model be revised as one of "encoding/redecoding and of reading through" (p. 34). He uses "reading through" to describe how interpretive processes exist in states of dialogic flux while arguing that Hall's model incorrectly "spatializes what is an inherently temporal process." Gray explains his contention by noting John Ellis' (1999) observation that television writers frequently "work through" news stories by "rounding them off and fleshing them out," and, as such, "news texts are *read through* other texts" (p. 32–34). Put differently, the semifictional storylines that emerge from the producers playful work operate dialogically to provide viewers moments to "redecode" and reconsider news stories they encountered previously, which is, of course, criticism's aim. Or a storyline might spark an interest, causing a viewer to work independently or viewers to work collectively to learn more about a topic, which is what Mittell's drilling suggests. Either way, the (inter)texts that emerge are simultaneously results of and potential sites of cultural participation and critical investigation. Moreover, "ripped from the headlines" programs, like *TGW*, offer salient support for the arguments made by Gray (2003) and Sandvoss (2007) that suggest all texts are intertexts.

At this point, Catherine Coker's challenge to Jenkins' characterization of fan activities as "textual poaching" becomes relevant. Coker (2012) argues that Jenkins' conceptualization, while important, positions fan texts as entertainment products rather than examples of critical engagement. To address this shortcoming, she suggests "textual poaching" might better be understood as "textual liberation." In constructing her argument, she almost acknowledges the existence of the producer-fan as she touches on a history in which *professional readers* draw inspiration from other works and ultimately create what would be understood as fan texts, if not for these authors' privileged positions as media producers (see her discussion of Verne's extension of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*). By viewing this borrowing as liberation, Coker maintains that fan texts and core texts should be read side by side, thereby allowing fan texts to function as forms of commentary and criticism, which is precisely how "Infamy" operates in relation to Nancy Grace's program. This positioning, she argues, challenges the commonly accepted hierarchical structure as intertexts are created

and constructed within complex networks rather than within simpler hierarchies. Historically, scholars like Jenkins (1992, 2006) have focused on raising the fan to the level of the producer, an approach that maintains a hierarchical structure that arguably becomes more tenuous as fan texts are increasingly valued by the broader culture. As such, it is not always the case that fans rise to the level of producers or that producers fall to the level of fans; instead, fans and producers sometimes exist on comparable, yet distinct, planes or within the same space (as when an individual occupies both positions). To this point, Paul Booth (2015) echoes Hills as he writes, ''As media fandom becomes more common-place, both media fans and media producers co-opt each other's methods, inherently problematizing an either/or in fan/industry relations'' (p. 1–2). This sharing of conceptual space occurs as fans and producers behave similarly, and there is much to learn from observing and considering both. Mark Duffett (2013) notes, ''Fandom is about consumption *and* production, resistance *and* collusion. It reflects circulating assumptions, subjective feelings, shared experiences, common practices, imagined communities, collective values, social formations, and group actions'' (p. 288). By extension, fandom is escapist *and* immersive, playful *and* serious, and amateur *and* professional.

In this regard, producer-fans are strikingly similar to academic-fans (aca-fans; see, e.g., Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Zubernis & Larsen, 2012). Aca-fans balance the emotions and devotions that mark their fandom with the rational and serious expectations associated with their professions. Much like aca-fans, producer-fans are people whose fandom creeps into, or even dramatically informs, their professional practices. Having said that, it should be acknowledged that aca-fans and producer-fans are not traditional participants in the ''free labor'' systems that scholars like Jhally and Livant (1986), Terranova (2000), Andrejevic (2008), De Kosnik (2012), and Jenkins et al. (2013) often use to describe fandom. Jenkins et al. reference Terranova's work in writing that,

> Free labor is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited. [...] The fruit of collective cultural labor has been not simply appropriated, but voluntarily channeled and controversially structured within capitalist business practices. (p. 60)

For the producer-fan, the ''shameless exploitation'' that Jenkins et al. describe is somewhat reversed since these ''workers'' are compensated, and often handsomely. Professional media producers are also able to use their inherent agency to exploit the surrounding structures. Despite this reversal, the work they perform does freely promote the larger media systems of which they are a part of as it feeds on and feeds into those systems. In fact, making intertextual connections either leverages prior consumptive behaviors or encourages future media consumption.

The point here is not to determine whether the activities of producer-fans exemplify fandom *or* work but rather to determine if these dual roles and activities can co-exist. Zubernis and Larsen (2012) speak to this when they write, "The [fangirl] has no place in an academic text, and yet it is precisely that fangirl who informs everything we write about" (p. 55). They conclude that their attempts to maintain a "co-existence" of their fan/professional identities were "futile." The two sides of themselves could not be cleanly separated; they could not be one or the other, but instead were compelled to recognize that they were always and inseparably both. Efforts to separate competing identities will simply fail. Instead, recognizing the benefits of one's fandom seems to offer more fruitful paths forward. This is not to say that affinity or disdain, when present, should not be recognized and measured, but it is to say that all experience can be productive.

More importantly, both aca-fans and producer-fans challenge pervasive fan stereotypes. In his canonical work, Jenkins (1992) observes that fans are often described as "brainless" devotees who exist in insulated worlds inhabited by other "infantile, emotionally and intellectually immature" people who are unable "to separate fantasy from reality" while they work to acquire "worthless knowledge." (p. 10). None of these characteristics accurately or adequately describe aca-fans or producer-fans. These professionals illustrate that fan behaviors are not always benign and escapist, but instead these behaviors can and do inform serious, thoughtful cultural responses. Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) maintains that separating fandom from engaged citizenry is problematic and that "articulations between politics and entertainment should be seen as inviting the affective intelligence that is vital to keep political involvement and activity going" (p. 66). Put differently, she maintains the work of fans producing emotional, yet rational and thoughtful, responses to serious topics, which is particularly true of news fans. "Infamy" stands as one such response since the episode works to protect the news genre, and journalism more generally, from the rising forces of ill-informed, imbalanced, and often unfair pundits. Having said that, the episode's work does raise an important question, which is whether these efforts are successful?

Resolutions

Unlike many of the fan texts and sites that media scholars locate to support utopian arguments about fandom's potential, *TGW*'s fans have produced very little to suggest this hopefulness. *TGW*'s fans have created a few sparsely populated wikis, participated in a number of fairly active message boards, produced a smattering of remix videos, and penned some works of fan fiction, yet almost none of these texts or spaces demonstrate the type of critical engagement the Kings model. Instead, these efforts tend to focus on vacuous televisual tropes that merely serve as reinforcements of the fan-based stereotypes that producer-fans and aca-fans regularly challenge. Instead, the efforts of *TGW*'s fans align more closely with

the activities undertaken by Roscoe's viewers, who he props up by calling "citizen journalists." Like Roscoe, these "journalists" possess neither the moral compasses nor the formal training necessary to perform the work he directs; yet, they follow his lead and proceed to "dig up dirt" on the lawyers. Their efforts produce a set of manufactured "facts" and a salacious, decontextualized picture of Will and Alicia at a hotel's front desk. This picture is a frame grab from a previous episode, but within "Infamy's" storyworld, it represents a surreptitiously taken photograph that *TGW* viewers undoubtedly recognize and recall.

At this moment, the writers play off of the audience's recognition of a "will-they or won't-they" televisual trope, which has a long and established cross-generic history (see *The X-Files*, *Cheers*, or *Gilmore Girls*). As a narrative device, unrequited relationships engage fans and build narrative tension; yet, this tension tends to dissipate once the characters couple. *TGW*'s fans seemingly take this bait as they focus their message board activities (see fanforum.com; "The Good Wife—Fan Forum," 2009) on exploring these potential romantic relationships, "appreciating" performers/characters, and playing regular games of program-related Hangman. In doing so, *TGW*'s fans lose sight of the tangible benefits the program offers as they fail to demonstrate that they have become more savvy, literate, and critical-minded viewers. One would think that complex narratives would engender more insightful and productive fan responses, but ultimately there is little evidence to support that hope—despite the fact that "Infamy's" resolution clearly begs these fan behaviors.

The Willens plotline resolves with an outcome that often evades *TGW* characters; this time idealism experiences a partial victory. As Tim Willens, the missing child's father, and the legal team await the verdict, Will's phone rings. Will answers to learn that the missing child has been found. Tim Willens experiences the happy ending that the Duckett family has not. Ironically, a reward offered by Roscoe led to the recovery of the child—a reward Roscoe was certain he would never need to pay. The inclusion of this reward links the episode back to Nancy Grace as it references her settlement with the Ducketts; a settlement that included the establishment of a $200,000 trust fund the missing child (Trenton Duckett) could claim if located alive before his 13th birthday, a date that will pass in 2017 (Marikar, 2010).

"Infamy" ends, as *TGW* episodes frequently do, with Kalinda and Alicia sharing a drink. As they do, they watch a news report and eat some kettle corn. The image of these women sitting together provides audiences with a final opportunity to reflect. The characters occupy positions similar to viewers at home, or possibly those of the writers as they "procrastinate." In either case, *TGW*'s viewers see themselves mirrored. The news report gives credit for the happy ending to cable news coverage of the trial. The cable newscasters pat themselves on the backs for a job well done. Both Roscoe and his audiences will now forget the story that had engaged them as the news cycle spins forward toward the next *important* topic. Neither will acknowledge the roles they played

in the feeding frenzy that resulted in someone's death. In fact, that death will become a mere footnote in the annals of history. Yet, audiences are left with one last reminder of their complicity as the following lines are uttered:

> KALINDA (referring to the kettle corn, but indirectly to the report on the screen): This stuff's awful. Too sweet.
> ALICIA: Mhmm. And yet I can't stop eating it. Pass me the remote. (She flips to Roscoe who is now revealing more "secrets" from inside the law firm).

This scene suggests a stark contrast between the stereotypical passive news audience and the active audiences described by Mittell, Jenkins, Gray (2007), and others. In order to read through the texts they encounter, audiences must immerse themselves and engage with not only the text but the intertextual flows informing their construction. Ultimately, amateur fans must adopt the behaviors of critical consumption that professional fans model. This closing scene reminds viewers of the dangers associated with tuning out and passively ingesting that *awful*, *sweet stuff*. It is in these moments that producer-fans work to protect the news genre from the dangerous "counterforces" of popular punditry. It is in these moments when producers implore fans to join them by drilling and undertaking the critical labor necessary to unshackle themselves and "liberate" the texts they enjoy. It is in these moments when producers invite the affective collection of intelligence that Jenkins maintains is achievable and van Zoonen argues political engagement requires. In the end, as the episode's title suggests, "Infamy" juxtaposes the popularity of corporate news personalities with their moral and cultural failures. The episode accomplishes this task by demonstrating the dangers associated with the blind acceptance of problematic points-of-view delivered by bloviating, larger-than-life personalities who too frequently lack the integrity and journalistic training to perform their civic duties. In the end, the onus is on fans to hold news providers accountable, and that accountability begins by developing modes of informed engagement.

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Walter Benjamin and the Question of Print in Media History

Charles Berret[1]

Abstract

Although Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is a seminal essay in the study of media history, the work itself gives a surprisingly brief account of one of field's core subjects: the printing press. Books and literature present only a special case of mechanical reproduction, according to Benjamin, but the implications of this point remain largely unexplored by scholars. The purpose of this essay is to ask why Benjamin would have considered print to be different or less historically consequential compared to photography and cinema when the revolutionary potential he ascribes to these more recent technologies is also prefigured in his other writings on books and literature. Answering this question helps to create a sharper picture of what matters to Benjamin about new media and also points to figures like Georg Lukács who influenced Benjamin's account of technology and art. Ultimately, this line of questioning also raises concerns about the place of the "Work of Art" essay in the study of media history, a field in which the signal error is to treat new media as unprecedented developments.

Keywords

media history, critical and cultural studies, communication technology, aesthetics, philosophy of communication, history of the book, Walter Benjamin

> The enormous changes which printing, the mechanical reproduction of writing, has brought about in literature are a familiar story. However, within the phenomenon which we are here examining from the perspective of world history, print is merely a special, though particularly important, case. (Benjamin, 1969, pp. 218–219)[1]

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In this short passage from "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin places the printing press in a somewhat puzzling position. He acknowledges that movable-type printing is a form of mechanical reproduction and that its invention was somehow entangled with changes in literature. Yet, he also maintains that print is distinct from newer media like photography and cinema, whose political and aesthetic challenges he addresses for the remainder of the essay. The basis of this distinction is unclear, and its implications are counterintuitive. Whereas movable-type printing is often central in the historical study of technology and culture—and Benjamin at least implies that this position is both well documented and well deserved—he sidesteps the topic with little explanation.[2] Benjamin proceeds to offer a vivid account of machine aesthetics, the heightened political significance of mass-produced art, and the challenge this poses to the unique "aura" of traditional artworks like paintings. And yet books were not so different from paintings before the printing revolution. They were rare, costly, often sacred. The arrival of the printing press was certainly a factor in the decline of the illuminated manuscript—a medium both as hallowed and as thoroughly dead as any other—but Benjamin's treatment of print is so brief in the "Work of Art" essay that it is difficult to judge how much distance he means to place between print and more recent technologies of mechanical reproduction.

The question of where books and literature stand within the "Work of Art" essay remains largely unexplored, even in the vast body of commentary that followed Benjamin's revival in the 1960s. The novelist and critic J. M. Coetzee (2001) once noted in the *New York Review* that Benjamin had little to say about the printing press because he had focused on later stages in the age of mechanical reproduction,[3] but it seems unlikely that Benjamin himself intended for the age in question to extend so far into the past. The printing press appeared in Europe during the late Renaissance and grew into a fixture of Western society amid a flourishing of the very arts that Benjamin considered to be transformed by photography. Instead, the "Work of Art" essay mostly ranges over the long 19th century, when a rush of invention and an expansion of industry encouraged the impression of an age defined by its machines. "For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial," wrote the symbolist poet Paul Valery in a passage that Benjamin quotes to begin the "Work of Art" essay (Benjamin, 1969, p. 217). Technologies developed during the 19th century promised, in Valery's words, to "transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting art itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art" (p. 217). By the close of the 19th century, photography, sound recording, and moving images brought new forms of entertainment to the masses as the means of mechanical reproduction made these works abundant enough to distribute widely. Books and newspapers also found larger

audiences during the machine age, with the steam-powered rotary press and automated typesetting machines dramatically increasing the possible speed and scale of printing runs, but the evolution of print and its own extension to a broader public was already five centuries along by that point in time.

This highlights the need for caution when we imagine the ‘‘familiar story’’ Benjamin had in mind when he wrote that the arrival of the printing press had been somehow entangled with changes in literature. This story is so familiar to media historians today that it is difficult to pinpoint which version Benjamin had in mind when he was writing in the 1930s. Today, we tend to associate this line of thinking with accounts published decades later by people like Marshall McLuhan (1962), Walter Ong (1982/2013), Elizabeth Eisenstein (1978, 2005), or even Friedrich Kittler (1986/1999). Writers in this tradition tend to describe the printing revolution as a period that reconfigured modes of communication and transformed any number of Western institutions.[4] With this well-known and variously contested (Johns, 1998; Williams, 1974) discourse in mind, it would be perilously simple to misread Benjamin’s familiar manner of speaking and reroute his account of print and literature through later lines of thinking.

On the other hand, Benjamin might have had an even more widely familiar story in mind. Perhaps he meant to offer a quick gesture to Gutenberg, who is well known even to schoolchildren and is commonly credited with opening the gates of social, political, and religious upheaval in Europe by providing reading material to increasingly literate masses. Even though this interpretation is attractive in its simplicity, it would not clarify whether Benjamin accords to print the same radical potential he sees in other means of mechanical reproduction. If Benjamin had meant to credit the printing press with this common account of its social effects, the list would closely resemble the central provocations in the ‘‘Work of Art’’ essay, namely, that the emergence of a mass medium may transform both art and society. In short, it still does not answer why Benjamin would consider the mechanical reproduction of books to be a special case distinct from photography.

Granted, the topic of print is all but absent in the ‘‘Work of Art’’ essay, and it could appear misguided to approach such a bountiful work through its omissions. But the history of the book is a considerable matter to leave on the margins during any discussion of mechanical reproduction, much less one that has been so widely influential. To foreground the status of print while reading the ‘‘Work of Art’’ essay raises critical questions about a piece that has become well rehearsed in many fields of study. Specifically, how does Benjamin define an artwork or its aura such that books and literature might be excluded? What are the qualities of photography and cinema such that they might stand apart from earlier means of mechanical reproduction? And who does Benjamin consider the audience for the ‘‘Work of Art’’ essay such that the printing press and its ‘‘transformation of literature’’ would be familiar enough to gloss in a

few lines? To approach the "Work of Art" essay with these points in mind is to insist upon a sharper picture of what matters to Benjamin about media technologies in general and what features he ascribes to mechanical reproduction itself. Ultimately, Benjamin's apparent bias toward the new media technologies of his own time should raise concerns, especially among media historians who consider it a grievous error to treat the "new" as though it is unprecedented.[5]

The Artwork, the Aura, and the Replica: Delineating the Subjects of the "Work of Art" Essay

Print is not the only means of mechanical reproduction that Benjamin shelves for the "Work of Art" essay. Just before he addresses print, Benjamin lists several earlier techniques for crafting in batches.[6] He notes the ancient arts of terra-cotta molding, coin stamping, and metal founding. Then, in addition to movable type, Benjamin points to lithography, woodblock printing, and copperplate etching as technologies of mechanical bookmaking. He pushes each of these technologies aside, noting them early in the essay as though to indicate that he has not failed to consider them.

Instead, Benjamin takes photography and cinema as his primary subjects in the "Work of Art" essay, and it is worth recalling why these technologies could have appeared to present such a break from the past. By the mid-19th century, devices for visual entertainment like magic lanterns, phantasmagoria, and even painted panoramas offered various means of depicting images, but these were not indexical reproductions of existing images, and they were not crafted in multiples.[7] Photography made it possible to directly capture an image and reproduce it in identical copies, while capturing a succession of photographs led to the breakthrough of motion pictures. The concurrent invention of audio recording meant that the ephemeral sense of hearing could, for the first time, be imprinted as a reviewable and repeatable document.[8] In his unfinished *Arcades Project* (2002), Benjamin viewed mechanical images with particular fascination, dissecting the insights of several inventors and tracing the deep roots of photography in the construction of modern life. For many, the invention of photography, cinema, telegraph, radio, and railway travel seemed to signal a break from the past, a newfound speed and ephemerality that Karl Marx famously expressed as the very character of industrial modernity: "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air" (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 476). Valery depicts the same feeling of unbridled transformation in the passage that Benjamin quotes to begin the "Work of Art" essay:

> In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge

> and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. (Benjamin, 1969, p. 217)

Here, Valery's remarks prefigure one of the most celebrated passages from the "Work of Art" essay, where Benjamin delineates the effect of mechanical reproduction on the *aura* of an artwork. The defining quality of the aura is that it originates in the uniqueness of the work, "its presence in time and space" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 220), which provides a direct lineage of owners and audiences back to the time of its creation. But as the likeness of an artwork spreads through mass reproduction, the original carries fewer of the privileges of limited spectatorship. Benjamin at first laments the consequences in rather dramatic terms: The aura "withers" (p. 221) when we "pry an object from its shell" (p. 223) through mechanical reproduction, and now the sight of immediate reality has become "an orchid in the land of technology" (p. 223). The aura, this essential quality of a traditional artwork, seems to be plundered as its replicas proliferate, whereas film and photography thrive because they were designed for a mass audience from the outset. The power of photography, for Benjamin, is not just to capture and multiply the image of other artworks but to produce a new kind of artwork whose basic purpose is to be replicated for a mass audience. To stress this point, the title of his essay is sometimes translated as "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical *Reproducibility*" (italics added) to stress that the subject is not the age of mechanical reproduction, writ large, but the age in which artworks have become mechanically reproducible.

With the concept of the aura, Benjamin not only posits an essential distinction between different artforms, grounded in their modes of production, but also stakes ontological consequences on viewership itself. Some essential quality of a traditional artwork can be debased when it is exposed to a larger audience, while the mass audience reached through mechanical reproduction is precisely the source of power for new artforms like the photograph and motion picture. Benjamin presents the concept of the aura at first as though to share a wistful regret for something precious we have lost, but this momentary concern gives way to a positive thesis about new artistic possibilities. Benjamin had defined the aura and registered its demise in order to untether the broader concept of the artwork from traditional expectations, and by implicating mechanical reproduction in this process, the "Work of Art" essay articulates how new kinds of art may emerge from the very technologies that have undermined the old ones.

Beyond aesthetics, Benjamin also noticed that the emergence of mass media could be politically precarious: An artwork multiplied and amplified by mass media could support any message, no matter how objectionable. Benjamin began writing the "Work of Art" essay shortly after the release of Leni Riefenstahl's film "The Triumph of the Will," in which her visionary camerawork glorified the traditional symbols of German nationalism and depicted the Third Reich as a glamorous war machine. Hitler's incendiary radio broadcasts

compounded the impression that mass media could enable persuasion and deception on a previously unimaginable scale. For Benjamin's colleagues in the Frankfurt School, notably Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, these cases contributed to a growing conviction that mass media are inevitably colored with an insidious stain, exemplified in popular works of low culture produced for seemingly defenseless audiences. Adorno would later argue that only artworks on the remote perimeter of the avant-garde, like Arnold Schoenberg's serial compositions, could manage to resist appropriation within the culture industry because they are *inherently unenjoyable* and thus anathema to commercial interests.[9] In essence, Adorno called for an aesthetic retreat against the encroachment of mass media.

Despite this disagreement, Benjamin and Adorno's aesthetic theories were both influenced by the seminal art historian Alois Riegl, whose concept of *Kunstwollen* (or "artistic will") describes the perennial, active reinvention of art during each historical era. As Riegl argued in his landmark study *The Late Roman Art Industry* (1985), the significance of an artwork is not decorative or even mimetic, as competing theories held; An artwork is significant because it projects a specific way of understanding the world. In a sense, Adorno and Benjamin stood behind competing *Kunstwollen*, and their disagreement lay implicitly in the question of whether mass media contributed to the *Kunstwollen* of their time or threatened to destroy it.

Beyond style and form, the meaning of "art" is if course persistently contested, and there were conspicuous shifts in the use and referents of the term *art* even during the century leading up to the gathering of the Frankfurt School.[10] Both Paul Oskar Kristeller (1951) and Raymond Williams (1958) have traced the modern concepts of "art" and "aesthetics" to 18th century moral philosophy and literary criticism. With the origin of the "aesthetic" as a philosophical concern in the work of Alexander Baumgarten, the term remained close to its ancient Greek root, *aisthitikos*—experience gathered through the passive reception of the senses rather than the active construction of the rational faculties.[11] After Baumgarten, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant began to associate aesthetics with a sense of beauty that must be cultivated by training one's private faculties of judgment, while Edmund Burke's notion of the "sublime" first imparted religious qualities to the experience of art. In studying this complicated history, Susan Buck-Morss (1992) has even argued that the very concept of aesthetics had only begun to be applied to the fine arts during Benjamin's lifetime. This further complicates the task of identifying Benjamin's subject matter when he discusses the fate of artworks confronted with technologies that can reproduce replicas on a massive scale.

One reading of the "Work of Art" essay holds that artworks had only become *auratic* at some point in the recent past, and thus only some artworks even have an aura. Paddy Scannell (2003) suggests that Benjamin's concept of the aura points to a relatively recent change in the very nature of art, following in the wake of the Renaissance and the rise of secular devotion to the arts.

This argument is rooted in Benjamin's claim that today's artworks have fallen upon *negative theology*, a manner of definition by negative assertion that leads to the autonomy of the arts from outside concerns—better known as the principle of art for art's sake. When art was detached from its ritual function, religious concepts like the "sublime" and the "transcendent" gained freestanding secular significance. The aura, on this account, is a product of negative theology. Given this line of thinking, we could infer that film and photography could have been among the first technologies to affect the aura of an artwork, but only because the aura had only entered Western art in recent centuries.

Yet, the idea of preauratic art is unsatisfying in the greater context of the "Work of Art" essay. Benjamin treats ancient art alongside the masterpieces of the Renaissance when he discusses the nature of the aura. His examples stretch as far back as prehistoric ritual artifacts, and he gestures often to classical Greece. Mechanical reproduction should confront all historical artworks with the same challenges outlined in the "Work of Art" essay. Among these, the disappearing aura is just one in a larger set of connections between mass reproduction, social movements, new ways of seeing, and the political stakes of a historical moment. Taken literally, Benjamin treats artworks, past and present, as exceptional only insofar as the means of mechanical reproduction appear to affect them uniquely—whether as a threat to the aura of traditional arts like painting and sculpture or as a catalyst in the formation of new ones like photography and cinema.

Still, not all *forms* of art seem to have an aura as Benjamin describes it. Consider performances of music, dance, and theatre. The score or script is in some sense the original, with a lineage that extends back to the artist, but this set of instructions for the work is not, strictly speaking, the work itself. The philosopher Nelson Goodman (1968) untangles this point with a useful distinction between *allographic* and *autographic* artworks. Music, theater, and dance are allographic: Every performance is a legitimate instantiation of the work itself, and furthermore there are no "fakes" of allographic works. An autographic work, on the other hand, is physically unique and accumulates its own specific history, lore, and provenance—the features that Benjamin considers the basis of the *aura*.

Returning to the question of print, it stands to reason that Benjamin is mainly concerned with the fate of autographic pieces in the "Work of Art" essay, whereas books appear to be essentially allographic. Each manuscript or printed volume is a token or copy. Even when the book is typeset differently, or reprinted in translation, it is generally considered the same allographic work. And yet not all books, and not even all printed books, are strictly allographic. Many rare and ancient manuscripts are treated autographically—they are unique specimens, treasured and locked away in libraries, museums, or private collections. Illuminated volumes, for instance, are autographic artworks even though their written contents are copied from a common source. Consider the

tourists who visit the Book of Kells and wish to bring home a memento: They choose postcards and coffee table books, not bibles. They want photographs that capture the rare aura of this autographic work, not its common allographic contents. This illustrates a pointed shift in the nature of the book before and after they could be reproduced by the printing press. Even early printed books, much like early photographs, maintain some autographic quality that could be considered an aura. The "Work of Art" essay offers a sharp lens for interpreting this shift in terms of the aura and the audience of a piece, but Benjamin foregoes the opportunity to apply this lens to the history of the book.

Locating a Familiar Story: Benjamin on Literary History, Class Consciousness, and the Modes of Cultural Production

Since Benjamin refers to the story of print transforming literature as "familiar," it should help to understand more about the intended readers of the "Work of Art" essay. He wrote the original draft in 1935, while living as an exile in Paris, and sent it to his colleagues Adorno and Horkheimer to publish in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, the journal of the Frankfurt School.[12] Benjamin had the support of Horkheimer, in particular, who thought the essay could attract wider attention to their school through its evocative union of aesthetics and politics.[13] Adorno, on the other hand, rebuked the essay in a series of letters. They settled on heavy revisions, and the "Work of Art" essay was accepted for publication in 1936, in French, under the editorial supervision of Raymond Aron.[14] Benjamin wrote a second version over the Winter of 1936. In this version, he walked back some of his editorial concessions, and he continued to work on yet another version over the next 3 years until his tragic death, in 1940, while attempting to cross the Spanish border to escape from Vichy France. These later versions of the "Work of Art" essay remained unpublished during Benjamin's lifetime.

Adorno responded indirectly to Benjamin in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* with his 1938 essay "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression in Listening" (Adorno, 1996). Here, Adorno facetiously dismisses key ideas from the "Work of Art" essay as merely "new possibilities" in the forms of "regressive listening" (Adorno, 1996, p. 295).

> One might be tempted to rescue it if it were something in which the "auratic" characteristics of the work of art, its illusory elements, gave way to the playful ones. However it may be with films, today's mass music shows little of such progress in disenchantment. Nothing survives in it more steadfastly than the illusion, nothing is more illusory than its reality. (Adorno, 1996, p. 295)

Although Adorno seems to leave room for the redemptive value of cinema, he jeers at "auratic qualities" and "new possibilities" that Benjamin ties to mass

media. Adorno rarely even mentions technology, itself, and focuses his attention on the industries and audiences of the radio and the phonograph. Adorno held that the music industry, in particular, would inevitably damage society and diminish the general capacity to appreciate art. Still, he maintained that artists could remain unscathed as long as they projected a radical aesthetic stance that remained incompatible with mass culture—distant, inaccessible, unenjoyable.

In the ''Work of Art'' essay, Benjamin not only argues that the means of mechanical reproduction can and have affected art itself, but he is also convinced that mechanically reproduced art could potentially steer society in a positive direction. Benjamin had seen both sides himself. He had witnessed the powers and dangers of mass media in the emerging propaganda machine of the Third Reich before fleeing into exile. He also believed in the revolutionary potential of connecting art to the masses, largely due to the influence of the playwright Bertolt Brecht, whom Benjamin considered both a friend and a mentor. In the ''Work of Art'' essay, Benjamin offers a pithy formulation of these cultural crossroads when he delineates the relationship between aesthetics and politics among the leading political and ideological powers of interwar Europe. He observed that the Fascists, from Marinetti to Hitler, had used mass media to *aestheticize politics*. Artworks multiplied on a massive scale could augment, amplify, and beautify war while concealing its horrors. Benjamin predicted, on the other hand, that the envoys of Communism would use the means of mechanical reproduction to *politicize aesthetics*—that is, to deliver artworks of genuine political significance to the masses.

For Benjamin to have constructed this elegant theory of aesthetics and politics makes it all the more remarkable to notice that the ''Work of Art'' essay is an outlier in his writings. It is his most political essay, striking a pitch of social hope and revolutionary defiance in contrast to the dreamy, buoyant, and cerebral tone of his other work.[15] Moreover, with the exception of some fragmentary reflections in his towering but incomplete *Arcades Project*, Benjamin wrote little else about the visual arts.[16] In fact, most of Benjamin's writing focused on literature, from his habilitation on the origins of German tragic drama to his prescient and influential readings of contemporaries like Proust and Kafka. In these works, Benjamin tends to emphasize style, insight, imagery, interpretation, and modes of expression, not the diagnosis of society in the midst of an urgent political crisis. And yet, in the ''Work of Art'' essay, Benjamin urges his readers to view his thesis as a weapon in the ''formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art'' (p. 218).

Beyond politics, Benjamin rarely addresses technology as a topic of historical or artistic significance elsewhere in his writings, but there is one exception that deserves closer attention. In Benjamin's essay ''The Storyteller,'' a tribute to the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov from the same year the ''Work of Art'' essay was published, Benjamin describes a seismic shift in modes of human communication over recent centuries as the epic form of storytelling has all but disappeared.

Amid this shift, he praises Leskov as the rare writer who still commands the force of epic style. Benjamin goes on to implicate the printing press in the decline of the epic, but he also notes its role in the emergence of new narrative forms. One of these he terms *information*, a form of communication that "lays claim to prompt verifiability" and must "appear 'understandable in itself'"(Benjamin, 1969, p. 89).[17] Information, as Benjamin defines it, is a phenomenon best exemplified in the daily newspaper's promise to help us keep track of a world that changes rapidly.[18] The other narrative form that Benjamin ascribes to the printing press is that of the novel, which is even more closely implicated in the decline of storytelling because it "neither comes from oral storytelling nor goes into it"(1969, p. 87). Unlike a fable or folktale, which may be recited and revised over generations, the novel is defined by the fixity and specificity of printed form, as well as the narrative interiority of the solitary reader.[19] But in this account, Benjamin does not consider technology itself to be entirely responsible for the decline of storytelling and the rise of the novel: "It took the novel, whose beginnings go back to antiquity, hundreds of years before it encountered, in the evolving middle class, those elements which were favorable to its flowering" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 88). The bourgeois middle class, which "has the press as one of its most important instruments in fully developed capitalism" (p. 88), served to create the book market and news industry just as much as the proliferation of printed matter contributed to their developing ideology. In this deeply Marxist passage, we find the clearest account of the changes in written culture that Benjamin attributed to the arrival of the printing press.

Beyond Leskov, "The Storyteller" points to another writer who influenced Benjamin's account of literary history. He credits the Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács for noticing that a novel's distinct narrative modes of temporality and internality result from its printed form. This point is drawn from the *Theory of the Novel* (Lukács, 1915/1971), completed in 1915, two decades before Benjamin wrote the "Work of Art" essay and "The Storyteller." Here, Lukács described the decline of epic form and the appearance of the novel as entwined not only with print but also with the emergence of a particular form of consciousness that was out of sync with the historical conditions of the modern world. According to Lukács, the art of earlier civilizations was attuned to history such that "every art form was born only when the sundial of the mind showed that its hour had come, and had disappear when the fundamental images were no longer visible on the horizon" (Lukács, 1915/1971, p. 41). On the other hand, Lukács portrayed the novel as a reflection of *transcendental homelessness* in modern life, a form of disconnection from traditional sources of meaning that is similar to what Max Weber characterized as *disenchantment*. An epic is inherently alive, social, connective, and subject to revision. Epic works depict to their audience a sense of who they are as a people and what collectively matters to them at that moment in their history. But the novel's reflection of class consciousness is more localized, less affirming, and less adaptable, according to

Lukács. It articulates a worldview of detachment, solitude, and ultimately alienation. In short, Benjamin and Lukács both find traces of alienation in the material and historical conditions of printed literature, that is, in the modes of literary production under the capitalism and its primary cultural organ, the press. Benjamin's account in ''The Storyteller,'' guided by Lukács, sheds considerable light on how he viewed the history of print as both a technology and a factor in the emergence of cultural forms.

So, is this the ''familiar story'' in Benjamin's comment on print transforming literature? Although Lukács was nominally Hegelian when he wrote *Theory of the Novel*, by the 1930s he had progressed to Marxism and was one of the most prominent living philosophers of literature. It is likely that Benjamin's audience, among the core of the Frankfurt School and the readers of their journal, would have been quite familiar with Lukács, his *Theory of the Novel*, and his account of changes in literature that followed the arrival of the printed book.

And yet, if Benjamin is indeed referring to Lukács in the ''Work of Art'' essay, then the case of the printing press would bear an even more striking resemblance to photography and cinema. Benjamin draws a parallel between the development of narrative form in print and cinema, where ''transitions that in literature took centuries have come about in a decade'' (Benjamin, 1969, p. 232). This passage describes the collapsing distinction between author and public—between the creators and audiences of works. Not only did the cinema deliver images to the masses, it also invited the masses to become filmmakers themselves. This popular appeal made cinema at once groundbreaking and also conspicuously similar to the rise of print, which led many readers to become writers themselves. Here, even as Benjamin maintains that the emerging media of his own time presented transformative challenges that were altogether new, he still uses print as a paradigm case for the technological and cultural changes he wishes to describe.[20]

Benjamin compares print to these newer media once more in his essay ''Little History of Photography,'' which leads with a historical comparison to movable type:

> The fog that surrounds the beginnings of photography is not quite as thick as that which shrouds the early days of printing; more obviously than in the case of the printing press, perhaps, the time was ripe for the invention, and was sensed by more than one. (Benjamin, 2008, p. 274)[21]

Here, Benjamin refers to the fact that two French inventors, Nicephore Niépce and Jacques Daguerre, had each tinkered independently with mechanisms for photography before they met and collaborated to build the first viable working model.[22] Likewise, the invention of printing is sometimes contested between Gutenberg and Laurens Koster, not to mention the much earlier invention of the printing press in China and movable type in Korea. In short,

even through the apparent fog, the resemblance is manifest even in Benjamin's own essays. Benjamin's every mention of print can make it feel at once familiar and unapproachable, resistant to understanding even though it appears to be deeply implicated in the emergence of his own milieu—and especially convenient as an analogy for the technologies at the center of the "Work of Art" essay. Still, Benjamin insists that print stands apart from "the phenomenon which we are here examining from the perspective of world history" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 219).

Benjamin's appreciation of print aesthetics is only apparent when he discusses his own book collection in the essay "Unpacking my Library." Here, Benjamin gushes about the aesthetic pleasures of his favorite pieces, one of which he boasts of being "designed by the foremost French graphic artist and executed by the foremost engraver" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 64). The quality of this book, executed in a collection of identical reproductions, could make it appear similar to a fine photograph, but Benjamin focuses instead on the private pleasures and the rarity of the work. He writes that "not only books but copies of books have their fates" (p. 61) and treats each volume as though the appreciation that emerges from careful selection can impart certain uniqueness to what is otherwise just a copy from a printing run. The replica gains something resembling an aura, but one that is paradoxically located in the experience of a single spectator. When Benjamin marvels at the potential of photography and cinema, it is because they can achieve their effects on a massive scale, whereas his appreciation of books is reserved for volumes that achieve some special significance even though they are merely copies.

Yet, the craft of bookmaking was not always premised on mass reproduction. Recall that before the printing press, many books were as rare and precious as paintings. Illuminated manuscripts, in particular, were sometimes invested with time and resources that could exceed the temples and palaces that enclosed them. These sacred books were vividly decorated with precious pigments on pages of vellum or parchment, and their creation sometimes extended over the course of generations. In short, these were unique objects of otherworldly significance, and they were supplanted by mechanical reproductions after the introduction of the printing press. Illuminated manuscripts survive today only in museums and special collections where they carry all the trappings of an auratic artwork.[23]

Even if we set aside illuminated volumes as an exceptional case, all books were once rare. Before the advent of the printing press, even the humblest manuscript would have required the concentrated effort of a scribe, and oftentimes collaborative effort in a scriptorium as large as any artist's studio.[24] This scribal labor was memorably characterized by Lewis Mumford (1934, 1952) as the mechanization of a workforce that primed the arrival of a machine to fully automate this form of labor.[25] Mumford deploys the example of the printing press specifically in order to outline the union of art and technics in a delicate balance, and he treats print bookmaking as the quintessential example of a

mechanical art that emerged from a precision handicraft. It is striking for Mumford to have placed the history of the book this light when Benjamin, just 3 years older than Mumford, had lamented that the early history of the printing press was shrouded in impenetrable fog. This points to an acute distinction. Mumford tried to understand the modern age through old technologies. In devices like the printing press, the clock, and the waterwheel, Mumford found logic and values that would guide Western society for centuries: uniformity, precision, and automation. In contrast, Benjamin wrote as though technology and culture had never been so entangled as they had become in the 1930s. Mass audiences gathered around new media, aesthetic values were challenged, and the political consequences were dire—but this description applies just as well to the Printing Revolution and even the rise of the Internet. When Benjamin placed the printing press on the margins of the ''Work of Art'' essay, he missed something crucial: the opportunity to probe the longer history of technology as evidence for the remarkable fecundity of his theory.

Conclusion: Walter Benjamin and Media History

The very fecundity of the ''Work of Art'' essay may play a part in concealing its omissions. Benjamin's remarks on printing are so brief, vague, and counter-intuitive that they seem to be overlooked by many readers, if not misunderstood entirely. Consider a recently published edition of Benjamin's essays from the Belknap Press at Harvard entitled *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (2008). It is a useful and well-edited collection, but its cover is decorated with a Ralph Stedman illustration of Walter Benjamin himself operating a rotary printing press.[26] This case, though anecdotal, highlights that the role of the printing press in Benjamin's most famous essay is quite easily misconstrued and even depicted as its opposite. The broader lack of commentary on Benjamin's view of print only underscores this point.

Perhaps the reason for this confusion is that many of the most evocative and convincing points in the ''Work of Art'' essay do, in fact, offer productive ways of interpreting the role of the written word since the dawn of its mechanical reproducibility. Benjamin even seems to suggest this in ''The Storyteller'' (1969), when he signals the decline of the epic and connects the novel and the newspaper to the emergence of new narrative forms. And yet, even at the outset of the ''Work of Art'' essay, the discussion of technology and social change is narrowed to a single historical moment, the interwar years in which Benjamin observed European society manifesting the economic and technological changes that had been churning at its base for the past half-century, according to his own historical-materialist view. The political uses of mass media during the 1920s and 1930s suggested that these technologies could have enormous persuasive power, and Benjamin clearly recognized the danger of mass media in Fascist persuasion tactics, but he also believed that mass media had the potential to undermine false

ideology and lead the public toward revolutionary action. For Benjamin, the cases of radio and cinema may have eclipsed the consideration of print, whose historical potential had already calcified into the prevailing order of the modern world. He treats the book, an object presently devoid of an aura, as though it never had either the sacred quality of old artifacts or the radical quality of a mass medium in the midst of emergence. Meanwhile, Benjamin called his readers to witness as new aesthetics and politics filled the airwaves and movie theaters.

Viewed from this angle, even though more recent accounts of the printing revolution do resemble Benjamin's theory of social change during the age of mechanical reproduction, these accounts may lack a feature that would have been crucial for Benjamin if, indeed, he was writing as an ardent historical materialist: The printing press, for all the turmoil in its wake, was entwined with the emergence of bourgeois class consciousness and the cultural institutions of advanced capitalism. It might be that print seemed different to Benjamin not because of its aesthetic qualities, but because it was implicated in an unfavorable stage in the history of human labor and economic relations.[27] Whatever role print may have had in the history of technology and class consciousness, it could easily appear to be just a "special case" rather than one aligned with the specific historical potential Benjamin recognized in that interwar moment. Even if Benjamin had considered the printing press under the rubric he outlines in the "Work of Art" essay, the question of whether the printing press had served to politicize aesthetics or to aestheticize politics might have appeared either irrelevant, or else lost in the fog of history.

Whether print has been dismissed, forgotten, or even cut for brevity, it raises the question of how the "Work of Art" essay should be interpreted as a theory of media, technology, and society. What many readers take away from the "Work of Art" essay is that new technological forms may bring about new symbolic forms, and thus new ways for us to construct and understand the world around us. And yet, strictly speaking, this is a broader model than Benjamin offers. If we choose to read the "Work of Art" essay as an account of new or emerging media, we should be prepared to concede that Benjamin dismisses the resemblance of old technologies like the printing press and the lessons to be found in studying this resemblance. Media historians tend to begin with the premise that all technologies were once new and proceed to gather accounts of how technologies were received when they were still unfamiliar, still taking shape.[28] This method carries its own politics: It encourages critical distance from new technologies and active reflection on how we may construct and understand the world through these technologies. The "Work of Art" essay instead depicts a society confronted with unprecedented challenges. This stance aids Benjamin in his call for revolutionary politics, but it comes at the expense of the wisdom that could be gained from studying past revolutions. Ultimately, the "Work of Art" essay evinces the same oversight that media historians often seek to correct: Benjamin invests the emerging media of his

own time with exaggerated significance, neglecting the perennial entanglement of media technologies in the development of human culture and politics.

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Notes

1. In the original German, this passage reads: ''Die ungeheuren Veränderungen, die der Druck, die technische Reproduzierbarkeit der Schrift, in der Literatur hervorgerufen hat, sind bekannt. Von der Erscheinung, die hier in weltgeschichtlichem Maßstab betrachtet wird, sind sie aber nur ein, freilich besonders wichtiger Sonderfall.''
2. The ''Work of Art'' essay touches on print just once more, in a short passage that highlights the collapsing distance between author and audience that began with the printed book and became especially pronounced in the case of film.
3. Coetzee mentioned Benjamin's unclear stance toward print as a sidenote while discussing the concept of the aura.

   > Benjamin's key concept (though in his diary he hints it was in fact the brainchild of the bookseller and publisher Adrienne Monnier) for describing what happens to the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility (principally the age of the camera—Benjamin has little to say about printing) is loss of aura. (2001, p. 28)

4. Critics of this tradition like Raymond Williams (1974) and Adrian Johns (1998) argue that locating a monolithic set of social changes in the arrival of a technology inherently ignores the intricate political, cultural, and economic conditions in which the technology itself took shape and gained purchase among its users. Recent studies such as Poe (2010), Cochran (2005), and Striphas (2009) continue to build a more nuanced understanding of print history than these early forays into the subject.
5. See Peters (2009) for a review of work by media historians who foreground the fact that all media technologies were once new.

6. In the second version of the "Work of Art" essay, Benjamin moved this point to a later section (VII). The quoted passage on print appears in Section II, framed by a discussion of woodblock printing and lithography.
7. See Jonathan Crary (1992, 1994, 1999, 2002) for studies of the cultural techniques, popular spectacles, and media technologies that preceded and facilitated the emergence of modern visual culture.
8. See Jonathan Sterne (2005) and Emily Thompson (2002) for historical accounts of audible culture before and during the invention of sound reproduction technologies and other means of controlling sound.
9. Adorno makes this argument most vividly in *Negative Dialectics* (1990), his intensely pessimistic final work. Here, Adorno suggests that genuine progress in the art, culture, and criticism may only be possible through negative critique. Even radical creative contributions, if they are noticed at all, will inevitably be coopted and retranslated into some anodyne, popular form that is consistent with the dominant ideology.
10. Beyond the particular history of aesthetic concepts at issue here, it is worth noting that there is no equivalent distinction between art and craft in the majority of cultures outside the West.
11. Benjamin himself privileges the ancient Greek origin of "aesthetics," apparently without noticing that the philosophical sense in which he uses the term had emerged much more recently.
12. After Horkheimer and Adorno emigrated from Frankfurt to New York City, along with the rest of the Institute for Social Research, they continued publishing the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* as *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*.
13. For more on Benjamin's writing and publishing during this period, see Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings's *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (2014).
14. The version of the "Work of Art" essay most often read in English today is not the version originally published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, but rather a second draft that Benjamin rewrote in German several years later. See the editor's notes in Benjamin (2008), which outline the history of the two later drafts.
15. Benjamin does address weighty political themes in the essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1969), also written in 1933, and on occasion in *The Arcades Project* (2002), a vast mosaic of fragmentary writings that center on life in Paris amid the rapidly evolving world of high modernity.
16. Some exceptions include his reflections on Surrealism in "Dream Kitsch" (p. 3), "Some Remarks on Folk Art" (p. 278), and an unpublished attempt to develop a formal vocabulary in "Painting and the Graphic Arts" (p. 78).
17. Benjamin returns to this account of the novel and the epic in "The Crisis of the Novel," a review of Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, but besides a brief remark about "petty-bourgeois printed matter," he leaves modes of production out of it.
18. Michael Schudson (1978) notes Benjamin's account of information to illustrate an emerging model of news in the 1890s that emphasized impartiality, and stood in contrast to the more narrative, story-based reporting that had characterized most journalism up to that point.
19. Elizabeth Eisenstein (1978, 1983) would later assert that the fixity of print as a material quality that influenced a range of historical developments, including the development of the scientific method. See Adrian Johns (1998) for a rebuttal of Eisenstein's account.

20. Benjamin's famous conclusion that communism politicizes aesthetics, while fascism aestheticizes politics, is premised on the claim that the new possibilities of photography and film have placed art upon this unprecedented historical crossroad.
21. Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" (2008, pp. 274–298) antedates the "Work of Art" essay by roughly five years.
22. See Batchen (1997) for an account of photography's invention as a response to a widespread and growing desire for such a device.
23. As some of the first printed books, Gutenberg Bibles receive the same display treatment in museums that their manuscript predecessors do. In Benjamin's terms, there is something special and ineffable about the earliest copes, remarking that the earliest photographs carry an aura that later ones did not.
24. Of course, in the preprint era, the scribal workforce also produced heaps of mundane documents like financial records, private correspondence, and official decrees. See Pettegree (2010) for a study of the massive role that written documents played in the day-to-day life of large European cities even before the introduction of the printing press.
25. Mumford writes: "The social division of labor precedes the mechanical division of labor... and the mechanical division of labor, in general, precedes the invention of complicated machines" (Mumford, 1952, p. 65).
26. To its credit, Belknap Press volume (Benjamin, 2008) includes several additional pieces by Benjamin on the subjects of journalism, newspapers, and the publishing industry, but these pieces total just seven pages including annotations.
27. A point that is often overlooked in Marx and Engels' philosophy of history is that they consider the inventions that flow from the capitalist mode of production to be valuable assets that contribute to the richness and complexity of human life, even if the economic system that gave rise to these inventions is ultimately unjust.
28. Marvin (1988), Gitelman (2006), and Peters (2009) make the case that studying "old" media technologies at the time of their emergence may offer critical perspective on the "new" media in our midst.

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Sounding Live: An Institutional History of the Television Laugh Track

Gina Giotta[1]

Abstract
This article complicates popular and scholarly discourses that understand the television laugh track as a crutch for bad jokes or a means to routinize audience response. By exploring early institutional histories, I demonstrate that broadcasters adopted the maligned technology to "fix" what was widely understood during the 1950s as the problem of the live studio audience. In aurally overriding—and sometimes altogether replacing—the studio audience, the laugh track allowed the industry to exorcise the capricious human element from the production process while still conjuring the parasocial aura that helped to both differentiate television from film and ensure the new medium's smooth entrance into the home. After tracing this counter-history, I turn briefly to the new breed of laugh track-free comedies to illustrate the movement of the laugh track's basic logics of liveness and parasociability into a constellation of formal and aesthetic devices central to the emergent genre.

Keywords
television, technology, history, audience, mass communication

While television viewers frequently cite the obnoxious or annoying quality of the laugh track, cultural critics see a far more nefarious logic at work in the atomic era invention. Slavoj Zizek (1998), for example, argues that the laugh track deforms emotional response by routinizing or obviating it altogether, while Paul Krassner (1990) insists that it is imbued with a "fascist" power of

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suggestion (p. 2). Likewise, when Hollywood filmmakers endeavor to criticize television and those who watch it (e.g., *Natural Born Killers*, *Requiem for a Dream*), the sound of canned laughter emanating from the diegesis often serves as a synecdoche for the banality of the medium and popular culture more broadly. This generalized vitriol found institutional extension during the early aughts in a number of public feuds between television networks and producers over the inclusion of canned laughter in a handful of half-hour sitcoms like *How I Met Your Mother*, *Meth and Red*, and *Sports Night*, as well as in the DVD industry, where original laugh tracks were omitted altogether or muzzled by "toggle switches" designed to give end users additional screening options.

Although canned laughter still peppers the networks' evening schedules in multicamera shows like *Kevin Can Wait* and *Two Broke Girls* despite such widespread condemnation, the sound of laughing studio audiences has largely disappeared from primetime. Half-hour sitcoms—the genre that pioneered the use of the laugh track during television's infancy—look and *sound* increasingly anachronistic and naïve beside the new wave of laugh track-free comedic shows like *Modern Family*, *Veep*, and *Blackish*. This generic drift, along with the retroactive muzzling of chuckles in syndication and on DVDs, heralds the death of a once-robust keynote of American middlebrow life, and signals the necessity of reflecting on its social and cultural significance throughout the second half of the 20th century.

Setting aside popular reactionary indictments of canned laughter's irritating quality and potential to mentally and emotionally impair audiences, this article explores the early institutional history of the maligned technology to argue that the machine was originally intended less as a crutch for bad jokes or as a nefarious mechanism of the Culture Industry, and more as a means of simulating the conditions necessary for the reception of humor and, ultimately, "fixing" what was widely understood within the broadcasting industry during the 1950s as the growing problem of the live studio audience. Dangerously unpredictable in their audible responses but exceptionally important to maintaining the profitable immediacy cultivated by television, studio audiences were an institutional complication rendered superfluous by the introduction of the laugh track machine and its enchanting promise of *controlled liveness*. By regulating the performance of the studio audience (rather than the responses of its home-based equivalent, as in Zizek and Krassner's formulations), the laugh track allowed the industry to exorcise the capricious human element from the expensive production process while still conjuring both the parasociability that broadcast humor depends on and the related liveness that helped differentiate television from film. Additionally, the machine supported television's entrance into the private interior of the home by bathing the new broadcast medium in predictable, nonthreatening peals of laughter that diffused anxieties about televisual surveillance and the transmission of social contagion to children and other impressionable viewers.

After tracing this counter-history, I turn briefly to the new wave of television comedies that eschew canned laughter to illustrate the movement of the laugh track's basic logic of controlled parasocial liveness into a constellation of formal and aesthetic devices central to the new breed of laugh track-free comedies. The translation of this logic into new textual forms challenges the notion that the laugh track's disappearance is merely an effect of increased sophistication among television viewers who have "outgrown" the extra-diegetic sound. It suggests, I argue, a concomitant growing level of sophistication among television producers, who have figured out how to fold these established logics into novel audience-approved forms that encourage parasocial relations not with cackling simulations of the public, but with sophisticated characters wholly manufactured by the industry, itself. In this regard, contemporary laugh track-free comedies—celebrated as they are for "respecting" the intellect of the prestige viewer—come closer to resembling the fabled object of mass stupefaction cultural critics warned of in their screeds on laughing sitcoms. Where the laughing sitcom merely simulates the social environment within which humor most effectively travels, the laugh track-free sitcom populates it with industry handmaidens capable of directing our interpretations in ways fundamentally foreclosed to the mechanical laughers.

Laughing Alone, or: The Problem of Broadcast Humor

> [T]he audience . . . remains one of the major problems in the transmission of comedy.
>
> –Max Liebman, Television Producer (1955)

In their 1935 study of the social and individual psychological changes brought about by radio, Cantril and Allport (1935/1986) make special note of the ticklish practice of telling and listening to jokes over the air. "The radio comedian," they write,

> has to work against heavy odds. Not only are listeners segregated, and therefore unable to stimulate one another with their attentive attitudes and laughter, but the humorist is . . . wholly unable to divine the listener's responses to his jests. [. . .] In general . . . most of the incidental conditions making for successful comedy are denied the radio humorist. Not much more than the bare joke remains for him. (p. 222)

While dramatic plays and presentations were well suited to the broadcast medium's one-to-many model of communication, Cantril and Allport recognized that comedy was more difficult to transmit over great distances. Humor,

dependant as it is on delivery, seemed to dissipate in the electromagnetic waves that carried it over hill and dale into the listener's home. As the comedian struggled to deliver his jokes absent the verbal and visual approval that customarily modulated them, the audience, for their part, struggled to find humor in the disarticulated musings of a person unfastened from the conventions of both communication and comedic performance. Without the collective laughter that characterized the genre and helped to structure the performance, comedic radio productions were received by listeners as something unintelligible and, worse still, unfunny. Early radio confirmed that comedy, more than any other genre, required intimacy and copresence—both between the comic and his audience, and between audience members, themselves. From this revelation, the studio audience was born.

Though the BBC reportedly began assembling small studio audiences in the late 1920s "out of kindness to the comedian" ("Studio Audience," 1926, p. 237), many historians of early radio suggest that American comedians Eddie Cantor and Ed Wynn invented the live studio audience quite by chance sometime in the late 1920s-to-early 1930s (Nachman, 1998; Sterling & Kitross, 2002). Cantor, a popular vaudeville and Broadway performer-turned-radio personality, was famously uncomfortable with the silence that permeated the studio during his performances. Citing the truism that laughter breeds laughter, he surmised that his jokes would be funnier and his own performances stronger if he could somehow figure out a way to inject the necessarily quiet studio with some of the animal warmth of the theater and rowdiness of the vaudeville circuit. Accordingly, Cantor decided one day to ask that studio personnel and guests not squelch their laughter and applause in the manner customary during live broadcasts. As the unplanned experiment proved a great antidote to the problem of the unseen, unheard audience (if only in Cantor's mind), the comedian quickly began inviting fans into the studio for both rehearsals and live shows, where they were instructed to disregard the sterility of the recording booth and very audibly enjoy the performance (Dunning, 1998).

Like Cantor, Wynn was famous for his visual clowning in vaudeville and intensely anxious about the emotional vacuum created by the radio studio. Far less methodical than Cantor in realizing his dream of embodied spectators, Wynn frantically rallied an audience from among the studio production hands when it became clear during his 1921 radio debut that the deafening silence would be unbearable for him (Dunning, 1998). Using their resonant hands to signify approval of everything, regardless of merit, Wynn's modern day claque eventually became a mainstay of not only his immensely popular programs but also those of other radio performers of the day.

While both Wynn and Cantor suffered a fair amount of criticism from other radio personalities and cultural critics who viewed their insistence on a studio audience as an acknowledgment of their shortcomings as comedic performers, ratings for the two performers' shows revealed that home listeners felt differently

about the new, audible interlopers. In their uses and gratifications-inflected study of the radio audience, Cantril and Allport (1935/1986) suggest that the home listener found in their studio-based surrogates the human assembly that comedy required, and that radio—despite being a mass medium—rather ironically worked to dissolve:

> Listeners at home are no less pleased with the studio audience. Most (but not all) of them report that the laughter and applause they hear make the program more enjoyable. To know that a normal group is somewhere listening seems to satisfy their sense of the proprieties of humor; they feel less foolish when they join in the gaiety. Even the pantomime, the grimaces, and the costumes of the comedian are usually of indirect benefit, for if they heighten the laughter of the studio audience the listeners at home are drawn still further into the atmosphere of merriment, although a small percentage become indignant at some of the studio laughter provoked by visual cues. (Cantril & Allport, 1935/1986, pp. 222–223)

As members of the audience with a privileged view of the action, the studio observers sanctioned the laughter and enjoyment of home listeners handicapped by the metaphorical nosebleed seats provided "free of charge" by radio. More than a mere claque buoying the performer's ego with loud applause designed to foment approval among unpaid members of the crowd, the studio audience functioned as what John Peters (1999) has described as a "communicative prosthesis" (p. 214), or a convention developed by the radio industry to compensate for the structural deficiencies that plague broadcasting. In returning the effaced body to radio, studio clappers also returned the attenuated sense of sight to the medium, as well the experience of communion between people who are simultaneously witness to the same event. Paradoxically, the clappers helped to manufacture the felt experience of being a member of a mass—one constituted not only of the broadcast senses but of the flesh too. The failure of early radio comedy might therefore be read as the body's revenge for having been discarded by so much 20th-century technical media. Only in its absence did we come to truly understand its indispensability.

Of course, as is the case with most prosthetic devices, the studio audience was an imperfect substitute. Its frequent laughter at physical humor confused the home listener, and its very specific ethnic and class composition encouraged the comedian to localize his routine in a way that often alienated the national audience. Fearing that he was playing too much to studio audience members and their specific working-class and regional ethnic New York sensibilities (his radio shtick was replete, e.g., with Jewish cultural references that listeners in the hinterland were not likely to fully understand), Cantor closed the studio doors to audiences less than 5 years after swinging them open (Rayburn, 2008). The work of managing the tension between the local and the national turned out to be too great in Cantor's estimation. If he could not figure out a way to give his private

performance the legs that it needed to travel beyond the studio and be appropriately "public," than it was best to dispense with the conceit altogether. In the end, he concluded that the studio audience had become less a proxy for the home listener and more a confusing extra-diegetic feature of the already hamstrung routine. What Cantor and his comic associates needed were laughers whose approval was not guided by their unique subject positions, and whose hysterics they could control for volume, length, and variety. What they needed were laughing records, like those produced to demonstrate the virtuosity of Edison's phonograph machine (Smith, 2008), that they could summon on a dime and recompose with relative ease. What they would get in the late 1940s thanks to German wartime ingenuity was magnetic tape, a storage medium that would release them from the inefficiency of both the live studio audience and wax records.

"Canning" the Studio Audience

> A comic and his staff live in constant fear of . . . studio observers.
>
> –Max Wylie, Television Writer, 1950

Upon his death in 2003 at the age of 93, a flurry of obituaries for Charles Douglass erroneously described him as the inventor of canned laughter and—by hyperbolic extension—every telephone answering machine with an automated voice, automatic coffeemakers, lawn sprinklers, VCRs and computer VR (Rosenblatt, 2003). Though Douglass was not the first to "can" human voices or even human laughter (that distinction must go to nineteenth-century producers of laughing records), he was the first to leverage the technology in the context of television.

In 1954, during his tenure at the television arm of then-employer CBS, Douglass would initiate a new era in laugh canning by developing the farcically spelled "Laff Box."[1] Upon returning from a World War II stint in the Navy, where his previous experience as a radio engineer helped him to secure a position developing shipboard radar systems for the U.S. government, Douglass began work as a technical director at CBS's Los Angeles studios. As Douglass' son—who would eventually take over the family laugh business—explains, his notoriously reticent father was not driven by bad jokes to invent his baleful device (as most people assume). Rather, he envisioned his Laff Box ameliorating a whole host of technical snags brought about the transition from live to filmed programming (Cohen, 2007).

By the time the notorious laugh broker began working in television in the early 1950s, the industry had largely phased out the ephemeral transmissions that had constituted its earliest post-war broadcasts. What had initially served as

the medium's principal lure—live programming broadcast primarily from New York City—very quickly became its principal complication, for the networks soon realized that they could not realistically finance a 52-week run and continue to make money (Williams, 2000). Moreover, as cultural historian Joyce Nelson (1992) suggests, liveness invited human error that both exposed the artificiality of the productions to home viewers and angered sponsors whose products were not always pitched as planned. Conveniently, for both the networks and the sponsors, the big Hollywood film studios were reeling from the fiscal threat posed by television, and therefore did not hesitate to step up and help facilitate the shift to pre-recorded material—a move that would ultimately reverse the flow of money back into the studios' coffers and radically restructure the television industry and its product.

While the networks were willing to relinquish control of the production of programs (so long as it also meant relinquishing the costs connected with producing them), they were less willing to give up the liveness associated with the broadcasting they had pioneered in the late 1940s. What's more, comedic television actors—accustomed as they were to the energy of live studio or playhouse audiences—were reluctant to perform without the immediate feedback of onlookers. Writing for *Variety* in 1955 about the importance of the television studio audience to the actor (and, consequently, the home audience), television producer Max Liebman observes, "Depending on the audience's enthusiasm, the performer can either be inspired to great heights or to ineffectual depths" (p. 104). Unlike the Hollywood film actor who could deliver the same punch line seven times without the expectation of an audible laugh, the television actor still performed under a proscenium arch—real or imagined—and therefore anticipated responses apropos of such a setting. Consequently, the audience became the central pivot around which the contradictory demand for the liveness of television and the refinement of film oscillated. On the one hand, studio audience laughter and applause cultivated a valuable sense of liveness that radiated positively toward both the performer and the home viewer. On the other hand, these audience rejoinders threatened to betray the recorded nature of the event when, upon the second, third, or fourth take, they began to register not the animate spontaneity of television but the labored repetition of film. The audience truly was, as Liebman mused, "one of the major problems in the transmission of comedy" (p. 104). And if there were any truth to Gilbert Seldes's 1956 declaration that "comedy is the axis on which broadcasting revolves," such a problem would need to be resolved immediately (p. 133). But where to begin?

In addition to the stilted laughter that issued from studio audiences subjected to multiple takes of a scene due to technical malfunctions or botched lines, there was also the problem of the nonlaughing or inappropriately laughing audience.[2] Because programs were now rarely shot from beginning to end (as required for live broadcasts), studio audiences were frequently subjected to a narratively

discontinuous experience—one which, in offering the punch line before the setup, sometimes left them confused and ill-prepared to respond in suitable ways. A basic attenuation of studio audience members' vision also helped to generate aberrant responses to the live performance. Sight gags and important facial expressions available to the home audience by virtue of the camera's privileged position under the proscenium arch were not always visible to the audience in the distant bleachers, and the gaggle of movable equipment (e.g., cameras, microphones, lights) required to produce a show conspired in still greater ways to obscure studio audience members' views at various moments throughout the taping. As if these visual handicaps were not enough, auditory complications also prevailed. Not only were certain moments of the show too faint to be heard in the far stands, but sometimes the audience laughed so loudly and for so long that it actually muddied the dialogue that ensued from the catalyzing joke (Liebman, 1955).

The sometimes curiously timed laughs and applause that resulted from these less-than-ideal viewing conditions led to an unnerving decoupling of the sound and image tracks for the home viewer, who would often hear an audience response that failed to properly sync with the action they were viewing on the screen. As with a poorly dubbed film, the absurdly laughing television show was ultimately a less pleasurable text, for instead of ideologically smoothing over the discontinuity of the production process, it waved a giant foam finger at it.

Initial attempts in the late 1940s and early 1950s to mitigate these "problems of the audience" primarily addressed the sight and sound issues and found the vexed observers sequestered in viewing rooms where a live feed of the show was piped in, and where their reactions were piped out (both to inspire the actors and to ultimately become part of the program's sound track). Such an arrangement ultimately proved unworkable in the end, though. In addition to being a relatively expensive practice requiring much valuable studio real estate and equipment, it was also found to "deform" the audience's attitude toward the show. The anger and disappointment that audiences felt over being "cheated of a live performance" aurally manifested itself in their precious reactions, thereby defeating the purpose of having them on-site in the first place (Liebman, 1955).[3] But regardless of the outcome of the sequestering program, there were still the problems engendered by repetition and nonlinear shooting. It is here where Charles Douglass enters television's proscenium.

Douglass' initial foray into "canning" came in the early 1950s and found him merely "sweetening" or supplementing (as he preferred) studio audience laughter using snippets of recordings that he had been collecting since before the war, when he worked in radio. As he had not yet constructed his machine, the method by which he doctored laughter during this exploratory phase entailed a long and physically arduous series of postproduction tape cuts and splices that—while impressive—were hardly efficient or flexible enough to offer the sonic variety

needed to wholly replace live spectators. The limitations of this initial experiment led Douglass to begin tinkering with the idea of a machine that could easily call up a series of chuckles and weave them together to create a sonically rich tapestry of laughter in real time during a program's taping. The machine's operator, Douglass imagined, would be given a script—just like every other actor—detailing the type ("hearty and hale" or "controlled and crisp") and duration of each audience interjection (Cohen, 2007).

The new method would not only speed up what had, to that point, only been a sweetening process, it would also facilitate the smooth deletion of the capricious and institutionally inefficient television studio audience from the taping affair once and for all, thereby solving what Liebman had earlier identified as the central problem in the transmission of comedy. More than a mere endorser of bad clowning or script writing, Douglass' machine would help realize the networks' longstanding dream of controlled liveness, for while the television industry yearned for the control offered by the ability to pre-record shows on film for later broadcast, it was equally important to continue to appear live so as to maintain the apparently innate technical feature that profitably distinguished television from film. Thus, in streamlining the production of ostensibly live laughter, Douglass' machine would play a prominent role in erecting an ideological system of difference—or what Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/2002) identify as media pseudo-individualization—between the promiscuous institutions of film and television. As Jane Feuer (1983) notes in her important essay on the manufactured nature of television liveness, this has proven to be a most convincing campaign. Though Feuer points to production scholar Herbert Zettl and his ideologically complicit definition of television as "always in a state of becoming" (as cited in Feuer, 1983, p. 13) in order to demonstrate the reach of the lie of television liveness, she could have just as easily summoned Marshall McLuhan's discussion of television as possessing an "all-inclusive newness" and "all-at-onceness" that inspires a global "all-at-oneness" (as cited in Norden, 1969, pp. 430–442). Thanks, in part, to the laugh track's rendition of consistently appropriate, seemingly embodied laughter, many otherwise astute observers of media (like McLuhan) have mistaken television's ontology for its deftly engineered ideology.

By 1954, after 3 years of experimental yuk-making for CBS's inaugural filmed television sitcom *I Love Lucy*, the mysterious device that would one day earn Douglass an Emmy (and some infamy) was finally operable. Described by one television writer in 1964 as "a diabolical machine about the size of an accordion," Douglass' machinations took the form of a hulking—but eerily nondescript—black box that stood just slightly over two feet tall and consisted of eight control buttons cleverly refashioned from typewriter keys (Humphrey, 1964). When struck, the concealed keys triggered motorized drums, to which Douglass had glued audiotape of carefully edited laughter. Operators played the keys much like they would those of a more traditional

instrument and manipulated a series of knobs that allowed them to ride gain on the made-to-order laugh symphonies.

Word of Douglass' invention spread quickly throughout Hollywood, and in a matter of months, he had secured enough interest in the machine to quit his job with CBS and become an independent laugh broker (Cohen, 2007). His "laugh-scapes" were so successful, in fact, that he became the laugh broker to Hollywood. And by virtue of an exclusive patent and an almost ritualistic level of secrecy surrounding the "guts" of the reportedly padlocked Laff Box, his machine would remain the industry standard for years to come. While other canners tried to compete with Douglass by building their own boxes and laugh libraries, the networks' overwhelming preference for Douglass' store of laughs made such gambits difficult. Laff man Ralph Waldo Emerson III postulates that Douglass farmed his voices in those halcyon days on the set of *I Love Lucy* and *The Red Skelton Show* (where plentiful sight gags produced the intense, clipped laughter that studios loved) and continued to animate this indigenous repertoire of chuckles well into the 1990s on such sitcoms as *Seinfeld* and *Mad About You* (Rosenbaum, 1978). Reflecting on the seeming impossibility of competing with Douglass' veritable global monopoly on simulated television laughter, a frustrated Emerson asserts in a 1975 interview, "It's become an automatic thing. You want laughs you go to Charlie, he's got the golden ears, they all say" (cited in Rosenbaum, 1978, p. 133). What was apparently "golden" about Douglass' ear seemed to be its deafness—deafness to novelty, expressive realism, and variety. But as far as producers were concerned, his was a tin ear that delivered on the original promise of the laugh track: to "fix" the problem of the audience so as to profitably exploit both the versatility and polish of film, as well as the unique sense of "being there" facilitated by television. And while other laff men could very well deliver on this promise, too, their laughs could not replicate the single biggest value-added feature of the Douglass catalogue—sonic familiarity.

The Comfort of Banality

Charles Douglass' laughs might well have sounded, as Emerson opines, "very old" and "very tired" (cited in Rosenbaum, 1978, p.134), but embedded in that string of adjectives is also a sense of the familiar, and in the 1950s, when television broadcasting was still new and relatively mysterious to home viewers, highlighting the medium's ordinariness was as important as underlining its uniqueness.

Lynn Spigel (1992) illustrates this double-bind of the television broadcaster in her seminal account of the medium's post-war uptake in the United States, where the technology generated so much anxiety about its superhuman power to potentially monitor the home's occupants that popular magazines began offering tips for covering the screens in aesthetically appealing ways so as to guard against any lurking threat of surveillance while the sets were not in use.

Similarly, there was (and continues to be) concern about the technology's ability to transmit dangerous foreign contagion into the "antiseptic" space of the home (Spigel, 1992).[4] While the feared contagion was often of the moral or ideological variety, it emerged as something quite tangible in the late 1960s when it was reported that television receivers were likely leaking low levels of radiation into millions of homes worldwide, thereby exposing viewers to the very fallout that they had been fortifying their Cold War residences against for years (Nelson, 1992). At just about the same time that it was revealed that television was slowly irradiating the viewing body, equally frightening accounts of children suffering violent seizures induced by the machine's flickering light began to surface in medical journals and PTA newsletters, where parents were warned of the dangers of "television epilepsy" (Mander, 1978, pp. 162–163). Though many people "made room for television" (to use Spigel's phrase) after World War II, they did so with reservations about its potential to mentally and physically deform their lives. If television were to succeed amidst so many reports of its alien effects, it would have to find a way to modulate the public's reservations—to ingratiate itself with viewers skeptical of its folkloric capacity to dissolve the border between the protected domestic sphere and its writhing public counterpart.

The laugh track, in all its banal glory, provided one such strategy for overcoming viewer resistance based on fear of the medium's technological foreignness. As Scannell (1996) has suggested, broadcasters have long felt compelled to actively breed familiarity in order to become a welcomed part of the home—in order to avoid coming across to the home audience as uninvited guests with ill motives. Consequently, broadcasters have developed a number of techniques for replicating the style of warm, interpersonal communication that mass media are structurally incapable of, including friendly looks and plain talk steeped in manufactured chumminess. Although Scannell does not focus on broadcast laughter, it clearly belongs to the family of familiarity-enhancing techniques he describes, for laughter quite naturally engenders the experience of human communion that radio and television tirelessly work to produce. While live audience laughter did, in itself, yield the amity networks hungered for, its relative instability and unpredictability from week-to-week by virtue of filming practices and human capriciousness made it more of a liability to broadcasters' home integration project than an asset. Not only did they risk, with the live audience, incongruous laughter within each individual episode, but also uneven responses across the life of the show. The laugh track, on the other hand, promised sonic continuity within and among episodes. Still more, the continuity, or canned sound, cultivated by each show had additional purchase beyond that discrete program, for the promiscuous nature of Douglass' business effectively gave rise to a meta television sound that ultimately linked not only episodes and shows, but also networks, together in audibly familiar and thus comforting ways. Arguably, the porous wall of laughter that sounded across the medium from the ambiguous space between the diegesis and the home viewing audience

benefited the integration project still more by sonically manifesting a screen through which the possibly toxic sludge of television would be filtered before entering the home. By establishing a familiar bumper zone between dangerously collapsed public and private borders, the laugh track significantly helped the medium negotiate its entrée into a sphere wary of its intentions, but ultimately warmed by the peals of laughter that issued from it.

In addition to engendering a sense of the familiar within a medium that had the capacity to invite extremely strange elements into the domestic sphere, broadcasters also worked hard in those early years to cultivate a participatory conceit. As Scannell (1996), Horton and Wohl (1956), and Peters (1999) have suggested in their studies of the parasociability inspired by broadcasting, such a conceit would counter the inherently isolating and asocial nature of the new home viewing trend, and work to maintain the distinctive features of television that the transition to film threatened to destroy (i.e., liveness and spontaneity). It was imagined that a felt sense of association while watching television would enhance viewers' encounter with it. While broadcast news is often cited as the primary case study of this conceit and/or experience of broadcasting, the laugh track fulfilled a similar function in its heyday—though by a quite opposite means. That is, where the newscaster's direct address compels a sense of sociability by dint of the impression that he is speaking directly to me—in Scannell's (2000) terms, a "for-anyone-as-someone" structure—the disembodied studio audience laughter characteristic of sitcoms compels a sense of sociability by thrusting the viewer into a faceless crowd whose laughter works to cover over the incongruous experience of watching a comedic performance as a party of one. Far from trying to annoy audiences or standardize their responses to lame jokes, the laugh track helped television broadcasters curry favor with the home audience by inviting them to feel like they were still part of public life, even as the medium was actively retiring them from it.

Feelings of sociability and of participation in a larger event were not only integral to the success of the medium but also to the success of the situation comedy. As Bergson (1901/1999) has famously suggested, "you would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo" (p. 11). Comedy always requires an audience, for it is an inherently cooperative genre. While theater-going audiences could always expect to hear such an echo in the screening space or performance hall, there was never any guarantee that television audiences would hear one in their overstuffed, perhaps lonely, homes. To mitigate this problem of exhibition, broadcasters built an echo into each program to act as an insurance policy against the inevitable failure of a comedic routine performed for an audience of one—an audience without echo potential. In this sense, then, the laugh track is a prosthetic echo that returns to us a little piece of the "social" that mass communication absconded with long ago.

The laugh track therefore served a number of important functions upon its development in the 1950s, most of which contemporary critics of the machine get wrong in their assessments of it. First, Douglass' machine fulfilled the dream hatched by the networks (first in radio and later in television) of controlled liveness. As liveness and simultaneity proved to be valuable, but not innate, attributes of broadcasting, television networks feared what the shift to filmed programming might mean for the medium's cachet as an everyday window onto the world. Though studio audiences initially helped the networks maintain the ruse of continued live transmission after the transition to film, their intractability threatened to negate the control and polish afforded by prerecording. Recorded laughter thus emerged as the rather obvious complement to recorded programming. Second, as a replacement for the unreliable studio audience, the laugh track allowed the networks to retain the profitable sense of participation and sociability that attached to live audience laughter. By simulating the "echo" that one could expect to hear at a live comedic performance, the technology effectively recreated the conditions within which the genre was best received, thereby making the show more enjoyable for viewers whose homes were bereft of the social facilitation widely understood as essential to comedy. In this way, then, the laugh track may also be said to have strengthened the relationship between the broadcaster and the viewer in so far as it helped to smooth over some of the structural deficiencies threatening to degrade the viewing experience. Finally, the laugh track abetted television's adoption and integration into homes wary of its potentially harmful effects. By filling the television set with warming giggles that reliably issued from the set week after week, the laugh track engendered sonic continuity that, in turn, bred a reassuring familiarity with the new technology.

As the medium matured over the second half of the 20th century, so too did its audience. Technological shifts that funded the rise of what Jason Mittell (2015) describes as "narratively complex" storytelling, the proliferation of online and offline fan communities that encouraged careful viewing and reviewing of shows (Jenkins, 2006), and the emergence of media literacy curriculum in schools during the late 1960s (Friesem, Quaglia, & Crane, 2014) helped to both legitimize the medium and cultivate an audience comprised viewers with more sophisticated television tastes and sensibilities than those for whom the laugh track was originally invented in the 1950s. As public condemnation of the device and new technological affordances like laugh toggle switches suggest, contemporary television audiences are far more likely to be annoyed by the laugh track than comforted by it. Consequently, canned laughter has largely fallen out of favor with producers and, to a lesser extent, networks. However, just because audiences no longer hear this signature sound of the broadcasting era does not mean they are no longer subject to its logics. As the following section illustrates, the ghost in Douglass' machine continues to haunt television comedy, and it does so in way that even the savviest television viewers both accept and celebrate.

Canned (*v.*) – A Conclusion

> All research into sound must conclude with silence.
>
> –Schafer (1977, p. 12)

Even canned goods have a shelf life, and by the early 2000s, the laugh track appeared to be nearing its expiration date. Increasingly, comedic shows without laugh tracks such as *Sex and the City*, *Malcolm in the Middle*, *Scrubs*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *The Bernie Mac Show*, *Arrested Development*, *Desperate Housewives*, *My Name is Earl*, *Everybody Hates Chris*, *The Office*, and *30 Rock* came to dominate the networks' primetime schedules. Though the programs differed markedly in their subject matter and setting, they were all united in their renunciation of the laughter that had accented television comedy since the medium's inception.

This lack of audible laughter was frequently cited in popular discourse of the period as evidence of a show's quality, smartness, and respect for the viewer, who now apparently laughs on her own volition and not when prompted to do so by a machine (see, e.g., Rosenberg, 2001; Richmond, 2007). Such evaluations curry favor with viewers who imagine themselves somehow more sophisticated than those who preceded them, and who either required laugh cues or, worse yet, actually enjoyed them. The real joke, however, is on contemporary viewers, for while the antiquated laugh track has disappeared, its logic is still very much alive, and operating precisely within the "innovative" formal and aesthetic elements that have come to be associated with "quality" programming.

The first of these formal elements to function as a partial substitute for the laugh track is the compromised fourth wall. Notably, several quality comedies, including *Parks and Recreation*, *Scrubs*, *Arrested Development*, and *The Office*, have included characters invested with the power to break the fourth wall and speak directly to the audience. Generally, in both cinema and scripted television, actors do not break this invisible wall, as doing so tends to have an alienating effect on the viewer, momentarily jolting her out of her comfortable relationship with the text and associated narrative universe. David Lynch's mystery-tinged soap opera, *Twin Peaks*, famously exploited this disorienting effect when it allowed the murderous character BOB to break the fourth wall in a few terrifying scenes that find him slowly turn to look directly at the audience, as if to suggest that he has been able to see them all along and could easily realize all of their hoary fears about the television receiver as a secret passage for the transmission of corruption and contagion into the home. By virtue of this medium-specific anxiety over cultural pollution, as well as the industry's cultivated deference to the viewer, television has historically been wary (much more so than film) of the theatrical technique.

Significantly, the comedies that use this unique formal feature do so on a regular basis, and not to estrange or frighten the viewer as Lynch endeavored to do, but to build a comfortable, intimate relationship with her. These frequent fourth wall exchanges (some verbal, some issued only through furtive glances and gestures toward the camera) effectively communicate to the home viewer that the character played by Amy Poehler or Zach Braff is watching the show from approximately the same privileged space outside of the story world as the viewer. In this special bumper zone between the viewer and the story world, which used to be occupied by the studio audience (and/or its mechanized equivalent), such characters befriend the home viewer and entreat her to join them in the act of watching. Though these new friends never laugh along in the crass manner of a studio audience, their frequent direct addresses to the home viewer encourage ''the illusion of reciprocity and rapport'' (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 220), or a variation of the parasocial interaction once inspired by Douglass' mechanized claque.

In addition to fourth wall disclosures, voice-over narration similarly functions as a sort of surrogate for the vanquished laugh track. In an extraordinary number of laugh track-free comedies, a narrator speaking from an unseen place beyond the story world either bookends the show with pithy introductions and conclusions, in the style of *Desperate Housewives* character Mary Alice, or prattles on throughout the entire episode *à la* Carrie of *Sex and the City*, Chris Rock of *Everybody Hates Chris*, and Dre of *Blackish*. The more garrulous among these narrators ''talk'' us through the show, at times adding post-punch line commentary (e.g., Chris Rock), while others merely shuttle us in and out of each episode with diary-like confessions and revelations stylized in the manner of a private exchange between two close friends. While such disembodied interjections are not entirely new to television (dramatic mid-century shows like *The Adventures of Superman* and *The Untouchables* both incorporated voice-over narration), their recent proliferation in scripted comedic fare is novel.[5] ''Those voices,'' says former NBC Entertainment co-chairman Ben Silverman, ''are great ways to connect to the audience'' (cited in Owen, 2007). Like Bernie Mac and Zach Braff, who seem to exist in an interstitial space between the viewer and the text, the voice-over narrator inserts himself into the void left by the laugh track, filling it with familiar and intimate dialogue meant to replicate the experience of watching one's favorite show with that special friend who always seems to make the type of astute observations that make television viewing more rich and more pleasurable. When the voice of Chris Rock asks ''have you ever seen anything quite so pathetic?'', the logical assumption is that he is communicating—however rhetorically—with us, the viewer. Likewise, when Mary Alice speaks from beyond the grave about all the secrets blighting *Desperate Housewives*' Wysteria Lane, it seems only reasonable to conclude that it is us in whom she is confiding.

The third and final formal feature to do the original work of the laugh track in the new breed of noncanned comedies is the documentary camera aesthetic. In *The Office*, the most successful comedy to employ the technique, the shaky camera is

meant to convey a sense of liveness that is enhanced by the characters' periodic looks at the fictional camera operator (with whom the audience surveys the often absurd happenings at Dunder Mifflin). Like the other formal techniques that have come to replace the laugh track, this one does not rely on the sensation of viewing a comedic situation with a large, anonymous group of strangers who laugh out loud together (a scenario apropos of the broadcast era that bore the laugh track). Rather, the documentary camera aesthetic generates the sensation of viewing the scene with perhaps one other person whose way of looking at the characters in the story world becomes familiar and personal—a scenario arguably more attuned to the current post-network era of niche vs. mass audiences.

When considered in the context of the life and death of the laugh track, these formal devices become more than a collection of hip new styles meant to respect the intellect of the cultivated and moneyed audiences that seem to gravitate toward them. Rather, they emerge as clear reformulations of the laugh track's original conceit of liveness and parasociability. More importantly, they signify the ultimate effacement of the studio audience, whose voice has followed its body to the dustbin of broadcasting history. While many have welcomed this change as a harbinger of the industry's willingness to relinquish some of its broadcast-era strategies for controlling the reception and interpretation of its products, it is worth noting that the new "people" with whom we are encouraged to imagine ourselves watching television comedy—Chris Rock, Bernie Mac, Mary Alice Young, Zach Braff—are *fully* creations of the industry, not mere manipulations of it. For all of its purportedly terrible Fordist-style emotional routinization and interpretive deskilling, the laugh track was still originally a product of the public. Its eclipse by industry ringers does not so much open up a new chapter in broadcasting history as it does extend and intensify the present one.

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Notes

1. Though it is not clear why Douglass used the farcical term *laff* (or even if he was responsible for it to begin with), the misspelling was a common part of American folk dialect throughout the 19th century, and thusly worked in its 1950s usage to articulate the laugh track with a certain jolly "backwardness" that hid the machine's actual technological sophistication and cultural import.

2. A 1977 episode of *All in the Family* titled "Edith's 50th Birthday" in which family matriarch Edith Bunker is nearly raped inside the family home as the studio audience nervously chuckles serves as perhaps the best example of the inappropriately laughing audience. A flurry of criticism about the laughter erupted in the press after the episode's broadcast, with some suggesting that it evidenced a desensitization to rape and violence against women (see e.g., Smiljanich, 1977).
3. Some audience members were still more upset by the fact that they had to watch the show on a black and white screen when they had a perfectly fine color set at home.
4. The resiliency of the "pollution fear" is registered today by our prohibition on "dirty" words and by our use of V-Chips and floating privacy bars that block the transmission of images of unapproved body parts.
5. *The Wonder Years* is among the few 20th-century comedies to have successfully leveraged voice-over narration. As with *Everybody Hates Chris*, the show is narrated by the adult version of the young male lead.

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Todo Mejora en el Ambiente: An Analysis of Digital LGBT Activism in Mexico

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Abstract
Digital media present great potential for disseminating campaigns, connecting with constituencies, and creating spaces for connectivity. This article explores a contemporary digital media project, *Todo Mejora México*, considering how emerging technology affects activism. This research illustrates how activists mobilize digital media, localizing and vernacularizing an international effort. Through user-generated projects, activists harness the power of digital media to create a platform for storytelling, content curation, and distribution of alternative lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender discourses into the media landscape.

Keywords
LGBT, activism, digital media, social activism, alternative media

Media are central sites of production of social knowledge of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) identity, where most people, including those who will come to identify as LGBT, first see or get to know LGBT people (Gray, 2009). Representations of LGBT individuals in Spanish language media often rely on exaggerated caricatures (Tate, 2013), presenting unidimensional, stereotyped subjects. In addition to anti-LGBT defamation, invisibility, and the use of stereotypes, Spanish language media face "persistent challenges" (Hernandez, 2011, para. 3). According to a 2016 report of Spanish language media by GLAAD—a U.S. LGBT organization that works with news,

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entertainment, sports, and social media—overwhelmingly, sexual and gender minorities are not shown in complex or diverse ways in mainstream media. Television stories depict gay men in stereotypical roles as the ''gossipy and colorful best friend'' (GLAAD, 2016, p. 11), with lesbians and transgender characters nearly invisible (Stokes, Trasandes, & Quezada, 2016). Many LGBT characters in telenovelas are ''relegated to the sidelines,'' sending a message to audiences that can lead to marginalizing and trivializing sexual and gender minorities (Stokes et al., 2016, p. 7).

Much mainstream media content in Mexico and Latin America ''simply fail[s] the LGBT community'' with frequently ''disparaged'' LGBT characters or ''a world simply not inhabited'' by LGBT characters at all (Perez, 2014, para. 10). According to Roberto Perez (2014), blogger at the Huffington Post, there is a need for diverse media representations of LGBT perspectives in Mexico that challenge long-standing traditions of religious intolerance and *machismo*, masculine-dominated culture (see Hardin, 2002 for more on *macho* culture). According to Monica Trasandes, Director of Spanish Language Media at GLAAD:

> Spanish language media content creators and executives have an opportunity to tell stories that connect with a rich, diverse and complex region and its diasporas by writing non-stereotypical characters and storylines that include people of various racial and ethnic ancestry, sexual orientations, gender identities, and disabilities. (Adam & Goodman, 2016, para. 5)

The state of contemporary Spanish language mainstream media, however, suggests little effort has been made to diversify and complicate representations of sexual and gender minorities.

Recently, a collective of young activists from Mexico has taken to digital media to challenge these mass-mediated representations and build cultural awareness of sexual and gender minorities, joining a global movement inspired by the experiences and hardships faced by LGBT youth. In 2011, Fernanda Garza, a lesbian activist from Monterrey, Mexico, stumbled upon the *It Gets Better Project*,[1] a U.S.-based nonprofit organization. The original YouTube video spurred an international movement ''travers[ing] national boundaries'' (West, Frischherz, Panther, & Brophy, 2013, p. 51), resulting in thousands of video submissions from individuals, celebrities, organizations, corporations, religious groups, universities and colleges, and politicians from around the world. As a result of interest and inquiries from international activists, in 2011, the It Gets Better Project launched a global affiliate network of grassroots efforts to address issues important to LGBT youth around the world. As of April 2017, the Project has affiliates in 15 countries/regions: Australia/New Zealand, Austria, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Greece, Italy, Mexico, Moldova, Paraguay, Perú, Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland.

The It Gets Better Project contains a collection of more than 50,000 user-generated "vernacular videos" that present unique articulations of the message "it gets better" (Brabham, 2010). Vernacular videos, often generated through webcams and on mobile devices, offer an accessible means of content production, making it possible for anyone with these tools to share thoughts and experiences through platforms such as YouTube. Inspired to contribute her story, in December 2011, Garza recorded and submitted a video entitled "It Gets Better: Love from Mexico," as a way to reach LGBT young people like herself. In May 2012, Garza's supervisor at the U.S. Consulate General in Mexico stumbled upon her video. Moved by her story, the Consulate General asked Garza to plan and host a reception for LGBT Pride Month under the theme "Todo Mejora," the Spanish translation of "it gets better." Garza harnessed the momentum from this effort and committed to building a Mexican affiliate of the It Gets Better Project. In 2013, Garza joined a group of individuals from around the world devoted to bringing a message of optimism to their countries and local communities. She and fellow LGBT activist Ruben Maza founded *Todo Mejora México* (TMMx)[2] in May 2013, developed and grew the program, and officially launched it to the public a year later.

While to date no research has explored the international affiliate network, several scholars have examined user-generated contributions to the It Gets Better Project. Jones (2015) argues the campaign represents a contemporary form of storytelling for activism, highlighting the potential of digital media to simultaneously share diverse narratives with diverse audiences. Brabham (2010) contends campaigns like the It Gets Better Project hold "enormous potential to intervene in oppressive cultural arrangements" (p. 10), presenting what Goltz (2013) calls "queer futures," ripe with possibilities and productive spaces for furthering dialogue and reflection.

Although the project has created space for LGBT youth and representations of futurity, Krutzsch (2014) contends the project presents a universal promise of improvement, through what he calls a "dubious narrative of progress" (p. 1246), ignoring power differentials between race, gender, and religion. A recent study argues the dominant narratives of the most popular video contributions to the U.S. project reflect a culturally recognizable Cinderella fairytale that overlooks structural and institutional inequalities (Ciszek, 2014). The narrative arc of the videos often emphasizes cultural elements of neoliberalism (Meyer, 2012), a framework that Grzanka and Mann (2014) suggest places the burden of a "better" life onto the emotional lives of LGBT youth who are instructed to endure suffering in the interest of inevitable happiness. These messages often turn challenges into opportunities and strengths emphasizing resilience development (Asakura & Craig, 2014). Additionally, the It Gets Better Project has been criticized for assimilationist politics that erase queer narratives, queer lives, and queer possibilities (see Halberstam, 2010; Puar, 2010).

Many of these critiques, however, have focused on Savage's original video and the most popular video submissions to the U.S. project, leaving unexamined organizational discourses from the affiliate network that have emerged since the inception of the international movement in 2011. By exploring the Mexican affiliate of the It Gets Better Project, this research examines the local possibilities and limitations experienced by the adoption and adaptation of a global effort.

Digital Media and LGBT Perspectives

Digital media have contributed to a shift in production and distribution of discourse by sexual and gender minorities. The Internet provides activists a way to bypass gatekeepers of traditional media in order to produce and control content (Cleaver, 1998; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). It allows for immediate and inexpensive information dissemination to people regardless of location (Castells, 2001), making it possible for individuals to connect and organize, thereby functioning as an important tool for activism (Kenix, 2009; Raghavan, 2009). Digital platforms offer alternative spaces to dominant media discourses, providing new avenues for activism by connecting disparate constituencies, enabling communities to emerge, and shaping new modes of communication (Ciszek, 2015).

Digital media enable sexual and gender minorities to converge in alternative public spheres, exploring identities and making connections previously unimaginable (Pullen, 2010). In contrast to mainstream media representations of LGBT people, Gray (2009) suggests digital representations provide LGBT youth with evidence that others like them exist beyond their local communities. Virtual spaces have become platforms for collective identity formation (Boyd, 2008) particularly regarding LGBT identities (Gross, 2007). While geographical boundaries have historically isolated sexual and gender minorities from one another, Heinz, Gu, Inuzuka, and Zender (2002) argue "cyberspace promises, at least in theory, an emancipatory and community-building realm that transcends intra-national boundaries and international borders" (p. 108). Such platforms present a digital escape from real-time interactions into a virtual space of acceptance and solidarity (Friedman, 2007).

Emancipatory and democratizing narratives of social media can be misleading and naïve (Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015); however, while much research on social media adopts liberatory narratives, such work depoliticizes and disembodies the digital realm (e.g., Brophy, 2010; Fusco, 2001). Although research in communication often suggests ubiquitous Internet access, as of 2016, it was estimated that with 3.9 billion people without digital access, half of the world is still offline (International Telecommunications Union, 2016). Some scholars have argued that digital media have increased resource gaps, resulting in new classes of consumers and producers of technology around the world, creating the foundation of the digital divide (Fusco, 2001). While recognizing new spaces and

opportunities afforded by digital media, scholars must not be blinded by the glitter of the "electronic wonderland" (Fusco, 2001, p. 188).

LGBT Activism and el Ambiente: Creating Space and Identity

Since the 1960s, Latin America has seen the emergence of activists mobilizing around gender and sexuality rights, homosexual liberation, and sexual diversity. Activism on behalf of sexual and gender minorities in Mexico is one of the oldest and strongest LGBT movements in Latin America (De La Dehesa, 2010). Organized gay and lesbian activism emerged in Mexico in the 1970s, influenced by the gay movement in the United States (Padilla, 2004). These activists came largely from the urban middle class, with ties to academic, artistic, and intellectual communities. In 1971, a small group of individuals founded the first documented gay collective, the homosexual liberation front in Mexico City. The homosexual liberation front, along with other groups, functioned largely for consciousness-raising, aiming to bring public awareness to issues impacting sexual and gender minorities. Momentum grew among groups of gays and lesbians over the next several years, and in 1979, activists organized the first gay pride parade in Mexico City. Through various historical moments, activists' voices have entered the public sphere, challenging and reshaping representations of sexualities, and more recently, activists have sought out roles as intermediaries between the state and society (De La Dehesa, 2010).

Historically, industrialization and urbanization in Mexico have in part created the conditions for the development of commodified and more legitimized LGBT spaces in urban centers (Cantú, 2002). The creation of these spaces fostered the development of an identity and community that served as the foundations of the LGBT movement in Mexico. In Mexico and other Latin American countries, sexual and gender minorities have carved out literal and figurative spaces, or el ambiente. The translation in Spanish of el ambiente means "environment, atmosphere, milieu"; however, in queer vernacular, el ambiente refers to queer social spaces or queer social networks (Allaston, 2007, p. 17). The development of el ambiente can be linked to the gay and lesbian movement in Mexico during the 1960s and 1970s and the creation of nonheterosexual spaces (Cantú, 2002).

The rise of a "gay" identity in Mexico is tied to transnational linkages between Mexico and the United States forged by globalization (Cantú, 2002). In *Homosexuality, Society, and the State in Mexico*, Ian Lumsden (1991) argued "three distinct but connected social processes are taking place in Mexico which will affect the construction and regulation of homosexuality in the foreseeable future" (p. 85). These processes include (1) tensions between traditional and new Mexican sex-gender identities, roles, and values impacted by the increased commodification of sexuality; (2) the diffusion of American culture among youth

through media, technology, and foreign capital; and (3) connections with the U.S. Latino population.

Recently, digital media are giving way to the development of online platforms that impact contemporary LGBT activism and reflect connections between Mexico and the United States. TMMx represents an articulation of LGBT activism and provides a fruitful site for the consideration of digital media and activism. This study, then, asks the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do participants understand their role with TMMx as LGBT activists?

Research Question 2: How does context impact digital media activism in Mexico?

Research Question 3: What role do digital media play in contemporary LGBT activism in Mexico?

Method

To answer these questions, this study employed in-depth interviews between 2014 and 2016 with 15 LGBT activists involved with TMMx. Participants for this study were obtained through snowball sampling (Manning & Kunkel, 2014), starting with the international program coordinator of the It Gets Better Project. Over a 2-year period, interviews were conducted via Skype with national and regional managers of TMMx, as well as with the manager of global partnerships at the It Gets Better Project international affiliate program. Depending on the participant's preference, the semistructured interviews were conducted in English or Spanish and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Interviews were digitally recorded to ensure an accurate representation of the participants' remarks and were transcribed in full.

Language is a fundamental tool for in-depth interviews; it represents both the data and the communication processes by which data are generated between the researcher and participant (Hennink, 2008). Language carries particular meanings that incorporate a person's values and beliefs (Temple & Edwards, 2002) and is a means for bridging the interpretive gap between participant and researcher to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon under study (Sarangi, 2007). Cross-cultural qualitative research, or conducting research in a language other than the researcher's primary language, is difficult due to added complexity and challenges associated with collecting reliable and valid data (Lopez, Figueroa, Connor, & Maliski, 2008). When the researcher and participant belong to different cultures, cultural differences complicate the interpretive process; therefore, translators familiar with both cultures are central to the translation process (Bontempo, 1993; Twinn, 1997). To account for the

complexities of a cross-cultural study, the researcher worked with a Spanish-speaking research assistant to preserve the content and context of the data. The researcher worked with the assistant to conduct, transcribe, and translate interviews with Spanish-speaking participants. In addition to translating the text from the interviews, the assistant also made notes regarding idioms and cultural context present in the interview data.

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, the researcher reviewed all 15 interview transcripts to get a sense of the overall context and participant perspectives. Next, transcripts were revisited, and words and phrases were highlighted to develop initial codes. Initial codes were reviewed, revised, and paired with quotations and phrases from the data. The researcher reviewed data a second time, defining and labeling codes into meaningful themes. Lastly, the researcher refined themes, highlighting examples and relating analysis to the research questions and literature review.

Findings

The three research questions can be answered by three overarching themes that emerged from the data: (1) *de ambiente*: I am of this space, (2) *la cultura en todo*: the culture all around, and (3) *el ambiente digital*: creating a virtual space.

De Ambiente: I Am of This Space

Despite sharing a common vision, brand, and model of vernacular storytelling, according to the manager of global partnerships, the U.S. staff at *It Gets Better* (located in Los Angeles, CA) recognizes that activists in Mexico are better equipped to respond to the cultural needs and nuances of the LGBT community in their local communities. He believes it is important that the messages and ideas for the affiliate come from the activists in Mexico and the affiliates "tell the stories of their community in ways that resonate and matter to their community." Participants in Mexico spoke about the organic emergence of the movement, the development of a network of young activists across the country, and creating spaces to share their own stories and a platform for others to do the same. Activists spoke about creating a Mexican-specific space, within a global project, where stories specific to the experiences of Mexican sexual and gender minorities could be shared and celebrated.

All participants spoke proudly and passionately about their involvement with TMMx. Many felt a personal commitment to participate, speaking about individual and social struggles, working to make the world a better place for LGBT people through this effort. Activists spoke about Todo Mejora as a dual effort to reach LGBT Mexican young people as well as to influence how non-LGBT Mexicans perceive sexual and gender minorities. One young woman noted

that despite the cultural challenges of LGBT activism in Mexico, she was hopeful for TMMx, adding: "We are people who are fighting for a better world. Not just a better Mexico, but a better world."

Although each participant's experiences navigating life as an LGBT person in Mexico differed, all shared being profoundly moved by their involvement with Todo Mejora. One young man noted: "If there is something that we all have in common, it is that this project has changed our lives." The president of the affiliate emphasized that TMMx means the world to her. She spoke about the power of a simple YouTube video while she came to terms with her own identity as a lesbian, noting that the U.S. It Gets Better Project gave her hope, strength, and courage to accept herself. She spoke about a responsibility to do something, to say something, to stand up, at a time when others are afraid. She harnessed this energy to create the Mexican affiliate, adding: "If I don't do something, who will?"

Most participants had submitted their own user-generated YouTube contributions to TMMx, and several participants recounted personal struggles of coming to terms with their sexuality and coming out to family and friends. Recording a video contribution provided these participants an opportunity to reflect on their past. One regional manager added that while growing up, he could have greatly benefited from seeing someone from his high school, his neighborhood, or even his country talking about what it is like to be gay in Mexico. One activist discussed how TMMx has made space for personal stories of coming out and living life openly as an LGBT person in Mexico like "no other project or organization I've seen." He added that TMMx is an educational place, a platform for anyone who wants to share or learn from those stories. Reflecting on the impact of the project, he wished TMMx had been available when he was growing up, coming to terms with his sexuality.

Unlike in the United States where some individuals can make a living as professional activists, one participant spoke about the financial challenges of LGBT advocacy work in Mexico. Volunteers devote their energies to the project because of their love of the cause and a genuine desire for things to get better.

La Cultura en Todo: The Culture All Around

Cultural context greatly shapes how participants understand their work and LGBT activism, acknowledging the differences between the U.S. landscape and ideological barriers activists face in Mexico. Recognizing the situational and contextual landscape of each affiliate, the manager of global partnerships noted the parent organization helps in whatever way they can but the efforts must be grassroots. Garza, the president of TMMx, identified two "really, really big things" that influence society in Mexico: *machismo* and Catholicism. Recalling the challenges she faced coming out to her family as a lesbian, Garza concluded that Mexico is a deeply religious country where misogyny is at the root of homophobia.

Several participants spoke about how LGBT identities are understood in juxtaposition to social norms so deeply ingrained in ideological institutions like Catholicism. A regional manager reported that "here in Mexico, what a father says, what a priest says has a big impact," conveying the influence of *machismo* and Catholicism. Speaking about the power and reach of the Catholic Church, the president noted: "If the church says something, like 'The color blue is forbidden in Mexico,' that's it." Another manager pointed to the perpetuation of homophobia by the Church that is often highlighted and amplified by journalists, quoting a local archbishop interviewed by a local newspaper who said: "If you let homosexuals get married, soon everyone will want to get married to dogs." The sermons from the pulpit condemning homosexuality supplement media representations of LGBT people, compounding a culture of homophobia in Mexico.

Participants spoke about the cultural landscape, emphasizing a lack of positive representations for LGBT young people. Several activists described how, traditionally, news media have been unkind to LGBT perspectives and have relied heavily on sensationalistic stories. Stereotypes of LGBT people in Mexican entertainment media, such as telenovelas, employ tropes of the effeminate man, the masculine woman, the promiscuous bisexual character, and the predatory transgender individual, creating limited representations of LGBT characters. Many participants noted that user-generated content, like that featured in Todo Mejora, has the opportunity to provide more diverse and robust depictions of LGBT identities that challenge mainstream depictions of nonheterosexual lives. The president of TMMx noted: "Mexico needs to see these stories, because we live under stereotypes and stigmas around sexuality itself," indicating TMMx is a visibility effort and an awareness-building project, focused on the lives and experiences of real sexual and gender minorities.

Participants discussed their activism as ingrained in a broader culture of strict gender roles and norms. A regional manager noted a culture of inferiority of women and femininity, adding that within mainstream society, homosexual men are often associated with feminine characteristics. He spoke about the invisibility of queer women and stereotyping of gay men in news and entertainment media, resulting in a silencing and flattening of identities of sexual and gender minorities in Mexico. Many participants noted *machismo*—hypermasculinity and male dominance—is ingrained in many aspects of Mexican culture, speaking to physical and epistemological violence enacted on those who stray from gender norms. One participant spoke about the alarming number of hate crimes carried out against transgender women as a reflection of *machismo*, pointing to a need for education about gender diversity in Mexico.

Data suggest that there is a growing interest in gender diversity, specifically transgender identities and issues, in Mexico. Many participants, however, noted a grave absence of transgender representations in the media, and one activist added that because of this invisibility, few safe spaces exist for trans people in Mexico. The invisibility of transgender perspectives in mainstream Mexican

media often results in looking to what participants referred to as "American icons" like Laverne Cox and Caitlin Jenner, high-profile transgender celebrities. One participant noted, however, that these accounts are insufficient: "I used to watch videos from the United States a lot. But I didn't see myself identified because it wasn't my people." She emphasized the need for representations of Mexican LGBT people produced by Mexican sexual and gender minorities.

Recognizing the marginalization and invisibility of queer women in mainstream media, the president proudly expressed the contributions queer women have made to the project. While the project has had several contributions from transgender women in Mexico, when it comes to sharing stories, the regional coordinator of Latin America laments that the number of these contributions does not compare with the level of participation from gay men. As a result of this gap, in March 2017, TMMx launched #MujeresDeLaDiversidad in conjunction with International Women's Day commissioning and curating content from lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women. The team recognized the lack of videos from women in the LGBT community and launched a photo campaign empowering queer women to submit a photo of themselves and one word that best described them.

In addition to the cultural obstacles activists face, participants discussed the resource challenges they encounter in their work with TMMx. Unlike the It Gets Better Project that has received more than 50,000 videos since its inception in September 2010, as of December 2016, TMMx only had 57 user-generated videos directly uploaded to the TMMx YouTube channel (and 170 "Todo Mejora" videos uploaded on a third-party YouTube channel). Activists believe that a culture of *machismo* and Catholicism results in an unwillingness to participate that prevents the project from gaining vital public support and contributions like it has in the United States. Several participants argue activists have to stand up to these obstacles. One participant noted young people do not have to choose sexual orientation over professional success, describing how TMMx helps show LGBT youth they can live a happy, unfragmented life. He shared his own story as an example, indicating that he does not live a double life with a different personal life and work life. He wants young people to know there is nothing wrong with being gay, adding: "You CAN openly be gay in Mexico." Conversely, another participant spoke about his many gay and lesbian friends in the entertainment industry, who, unlike in the United States where actors and celebrities tend to publicly come out, often do not make public statements about their sexuality. This participant noted staying in the closet is not an issue of safety or lack of openness but a "general cultural way of doing things" that frowns upon being outspoken or opinionated. Data demonstrate that sexuality and gender identity might be articulated differently in different cultures, suggesting the idea of coming out and the politics of visibility may be limits imposed by a rigid way of thinking about these issues.

In a climate where outing oneself as LGBT is risking professional, familial, and social destruction, several participants noted that people do not record videos because they do not want to jeopardize their reputation. One participant noted that for public figures, coming out in favor of LGBT people and rights can be a bad career move and can lead to bad publicity. He recalled a response from an individual that supported the efforts but would not make a video, specifying that he did not want his name on any materials. Importantly, these videos are only one tactic the organization uses in its advocacy work; they curate news media, create memes, share images and videos from events, and partner with local artists. By aggregating and disseminating alternative representations of sexual and gender minorities, TMMx supplements mainstream media depictions of LGBT lives.

El Ambiente Digital: Creating a Virtual Space

Participants spoke passionately about their commitment to build an online platform of content for LGBT young people in Mexico. Through social media, participants believe Todo Mejora is carving out a digital space for stories that have previously been silenced or erased from history in Mexico, creating a repository of representations that juxtapose mainstream media discourses of sexual and gender minorities. TMMx, as the president noted, "is a platform for real life stories," unlike the sensationalistic or scripted depictions often found in telenovelas or news media.

While mainstream media may be slow to change its representations of sexual and gender minorities, the regional coordinator believes "without a doubt" that social media outreach contributes to the progress being made for and within LGBT communities. He emphasized that through digital media outreach, TMMx is creating a "different space" for LGBT stories that is a "push" for equality for sexual and gender minorities. In these spaces, activists work to engage their audiences, helping activate and empower individuals to themselves become digital activists that will spread messages of hope.

The regional coordinator believes TMMx engages its followers, inspiring them to become digital activists by creating stories and spreading content in hopes that their message will reach people beyond their immediate network; participants believe this effort is paying off. As a result of more robust digital efforts, between January 2016 and December 2016, TMMx social media experienced exponential growth in reach (the number of people who see content) and engagement (the number of interactions people have with content), with nearly 3 million impressions (number of times content is displayed) on Facebook and 1.5 million impressions on Twitter. Additionally, TMMx added a communications manager to the team, who also serves as the chief executive officer of a digital marketing agency. He employs his expertise in online media for Todo Mejora, building bridges between his social media followers and TMMx.

The president believes that, unlike the U.S. project that works to prevent suicide, Todo Mejora is building the foundation for social awareness of sexual and gender minorities in Mexico. TMMx is an ideological project of visibility, working to get at the heart of silence around and violence against LGBT people. For Garza, the project shows stories of people who have survived, pointing to the cultural and political work that needs to be done in Mexico. Through powerful anecdotes of bullying, depression, and attempts at ending one's life, Garza adds that the user-generated videos illustrate the consequences of neglecting sexual and gender minorities in Mexico.

Activists are hopeful for the future of TMMx and LGBT activism in Mexico. One participant wants to see the organization continue to grow and "reach more hearts and minds," importantly, "both within and beyond the LGBT community." Participants recognize efforts must extend beyond the immediate followers of the organization, noting the importance of getting supporters to share content via social media to reach people that will result in a cultural "change of heart." Participants spoke optimistically about Todo Mejora providing a space where LGBT Mexicans could consume content, connect with others, and possibly develop virtual communities even though such spaces might not exist in their physical worlds.

Discussion

Riding on the coattails of the It Gets Better Project, activists in Mexico carry the momentum of the U.S.-based movement across the border to develop efforts that respond to local culture and context. Todo Mejora is quantitatively and qualitatively different from the U.S. organization; it is attentive to local, cultural specificity. TMMx is a grassroots effort with global cachet, sustained by young people who know and are part of the landscape, who live the challenges, and who are committed to local and global social change. Fueled by their own experiences, activists harness the power of digital media to carve out a space for the production and distribution of alternative LGBT discourses into the media landscape.

Where mainstream representations of LGBT do not reflect the complexity of lived realities, through efforts like TMMx, activists mobilize diverse voices and make space for alternative discourses to shine light on the multiplicity of identities of sexual and gender minorities in Mexico. Rather than relying on imported U.S.-based representations of LGBT or stereotypes in mainstream Mexican media, activists create and commission culturally specific local representations of sexual and gender minorities. Although the American recipe of hope and optimism that resulted in a viral sensation might not work in Mexico, activists at TMMx have identified areas for intervention and "visions of possibility" (Brabham, 2010, p. 10). For activists at TMMx, it is not so much about the future as it is about the present; it is about building a foundation for LGBT

activism to empower followers to be activists in their own capacities, not just to imagine what a future might look like.

Todo Mejora reflects the movement of activists that resist and reconstruct hegemonic representations of LGBT that have traditionally dominated media in Mexico. Movements like TMMx make LGBT people the star of the show rather than positioning sexual and gender minorities as tangential or supporting characters. TMMx represents a moment of queer possibility (Allaston, 2007), on the heels of local and global movements, working to represent the diversity of queer life and the people that inhabit it. Efforts such as Todo Mejora have potential to challenge and reshape notions of el ambiente and queer space in ways that offer productive possibilities. Findings demonstrate that digital ambiente like TMMx reflect social and cultural realities of individuals "in the life" (Bleys, 2000, p. 4).

The production and curation of LGBT lives may work to develop a repository of representations that are foundational for how audiences—both LGBT and non-LGBT—understand gender, sex, and sexuality, as these concepts intersect with cultural forces. Activists at TMMx take to social media platforms to challenge dominant depictions of sexual and gender minorities, piecing together testimonials, memes, infographics, images, news stories, and other discursive content to rewrite the narrative of LGBT lives in Mexico. What differentiates TMMx as an ambiente is not the interpersonal relations that take place but the production of and engagement with alternative content in these spaces.

TMMx provides not only a new channel to broadcast content, but it also makes available a "new kind of storytelling" that challenges dominant mainstream media representation of LGBT lives (Jones, 2015). In a space where news and entertainment representations of LGBT people do not reflect the lived realities of sexual and gender minorities, movements like TMMx provide "resonances" (Gray, 2009, p. 123) of people's experiences. For these activists, the project is not simply a messaging campaign of positivity, but it is an opportunity to create alternative content in a space that empowers followers to carry forth the message themselves and be ambassadors of the movement.

Scholars have critiqued the It Gets Better Project for not working to make things better; however, findings from this study suggest that activists are reaching audiences in unprecedented ways and challenging ideological and cultural institutions. Activists at TMMx are critical and reflective of their own work, recognizing, for example, the need for more content from queer women to fill the gap in mainstream media and in the project itself. Moments like #MujeresDeLaDiversidad are ripe with "visions of possibility" (Brabham, 2010, p. 10), and rather than glossing over structural and institutional inequalities, activists identify and address the cultural and technological barriers they face.

While the It Gets Better Project began as a viral sensation in the United States with celebrities, politicians, and corporations eagerly jumping on the bandwagon, TMMx emerged slowly out of the gate as a grassroots effort. Importantly,

the founder and president of this digital ambiente is a young lesbian. Historically there have been a lack of queer female spaces in el ambiente, and as scholars have noted, el ambiente has predominantly been represented as a space of male same-sex sexuality. While Garrido (2009) notes "the relative invisibility of the 'lesbian' category and the lack of information about spaces that exist for women," as well as mobility's tendency to "limit young women's ability to participate in el ambiente" (p. 30), this research illustrates how digital media provide queer women like Garza and other female-identified participants a space for activism and cultural involvement. TMMx is a manifestation of queer possibility: the creation of a contemporary movement by a young lesbian in Northern Mexico.

Although Puar (2010) argues Dan Savage's "It Gets Better" video is a "mandate to fold into urban, neoliberal gay enclaves, a form of liberal handholding and upward-mobility" (para. 2), the It Gets Better Project and its affiliate network cannot be reduced to this singular video. Many scholars and activists have been critical of the narratives of video contributions to the It Gets Better Project; however, user-generated videos are only one tactic in a larger movement strategy. Unlike the dominant "happily ever after" narratives (Ciszek, 2014) of the most popular U.S. video contributions, findings from this study suggest activists see TMMx providing a different function, not one of stories of futurity and resilience development, but one of alternative discourses to the representations (or silences) that dominate mainstream media. TMMx represents the localization of a global movement that challenges ideological and institutional frameworks impacting Mexican LGBT lives.

In contrast to the virality and corporate engagement that the It Gets Better Project has generated, TMMx emerged first from the LGBT community, then moved strategically to partnering with influencers and public figures that stood behind the movement's message. Associating oneself with an international movement evokes a social prestige and legitimacy, an opportunity for activists to write-in multidimensional representations of LGBT lives. Although similarities between Todo Mejora and the parent organization certainly do exist, TMMx is a local manifestation of a movement anchored in situational particulars and representational needs of its constituencies. Through this network, activists are carving out a space for empowering followers, actualizing the potential of this movement, sharing diverse stories with diverse audiences, and working to transform public perceptions of sexual and gender minorities.

In addition to supplementing and challenging traditional-mediated representations of LGBT lives, TMMx may provide a virtual space for sexual and gender minorities. Importantly, however, not all individuals that may identify as de ambiente have the same opportunities to participate in el ambiente (Garrido, 2009). The risk of conceptualizing the Internet as an accessible and safe space for all LGBT people is problematic because there is still very much of a digital

divide in Mexico (Keane, 2015). Although Todo Mejora begins to fill the void through alternative discourses and representations, its digital content may still go unseen by the most marginalized populations of sexual and gender minorities.

In order to assess the digital storytelling capacities of the project, further research is needed that examines the content of user-generated contributions to the project. Future research should examine the emergent discourses in digital ambiente like TMMx, exploring the situated knowledges, perspectives, and hierarchies, as well as inclusion and exclusion. Additionally, research is needed that examines how activists that are part of the international affiliates make sense of their work and the meanings they bring to their advocacy as strategic communicators.

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Notes

1. In response to a string of gay youth suicides, the It Gets Better Project began when internationally syndicated columnist Dan Savage and husband Terry Miller uploaded an 8½-minute video talking about their struggles as young people.
2. On April 3, 2016, the affiliate changed its name from *Todo Mejora México* to *It Gets Better México*; however, because most of the data for this study were collected before this date, the name *Todo Mejora México* is used throughout the article. According to the manager of global partnerships, the name change was central to building a stronger international brand and to familiarizing audiences with the global nature of the movement.

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Check for updates

Editor's Introduction

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October's edition of *Journal of Communication Inquiry* offers a range of articles, beginning with Erica L. Ciszek's "Todo Mejora en El Ambiente: An Analysis of Digital LGBT Activism in Mexico." In the face of active discrimination, a masculine-dominated culture, and the power of Catholicism to dictate social norms, the 15 Mexican activists in Ciszek's study remained committed to creating an online space for alternative discourses about homosexuality. As Ciszek wrote in her article, "By exploring the Mexican affiliate of the It Gets Better Project, this research examines the local possibilities and limitations experienced by the adoption and adaptation of a global effort."

In "Sounding Live: An Institutional History of the Television Laugh Track," Gina Giotta traces the history of the laugh track from its introduction to its phasing out from television sitcoms. Producers initially used laugh tracks to neutralize the "dangerous unpredictability" live audiences introduced into the production process, making television more palatable to home viewers first becoming acquainted with the medium. The phasing out of laugh tracks was accompanied by discourses about the rising quality of television including the introduction of a variety of new techniques to break down the wall between audience and performers.

In "Walter Benjamin and the Question of Print in Media History," Charles Berret explores the absence of the printing press alongside photography and cinema in Benjamin's seminal essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Using its cursory treatment as a starting point, Berret traces work that influenced or reflected Benjamin's thinking about print and asks what the absence of print in the "Work of Art" essay means for the examination of new media. Berret argues that Benjamin's essay glossed over the significance of the printing press in much the same way today's new media experts may focus on digital technology in isolation from what came before.

In "The Producer as Fan: Forensic Fandom & The Good Wife," Chandler Harriss examines, instead of fans as producers, the ways television producers' experiences as fans informs the storylines they create. Looking specifically at an episode of *The Good Wife*, Harriss studies how the showrunners draw from their experiences as news fans to create cultural critiques of cable news practices.

In "Fukushima Fallout in Japanese Manga: The Oishinbo Controversy Through the Lens of Habermas' Discourse Ethics," Derek Moscato examines

one Japanese manga's treatment of the effect the Fukushima nuclear plant disaster in 2011 had on the area's residents. He concludes that the manga created a site for societal discourse that was inclusive of voices from various levels of society compared to government and corporate-led discourses, which were dominated by the powerful.

Finally, in a review of "The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World," Brian Ekdale notes that author Marwan M. Kraidy veers away from an examination of the role of social media in Middle Eastern uprising, choosing instead to focus on the body as a physical and metaphorical medium of expression. Ekdale calls Kraidy's contribution, which examines physical expressions of protest from self-immolations to gestures to name-calling directed at rulers' bodies, "one of the most original and essential" pieces of communication scholarship in the area of social change and protest.

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