

## **Alienating and Reorganizing Cultural Goods: Using Lefebvre’s Controlled Consumption Model to Theorize Media Industry Change**

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The primary objective of this article is to develop social theorist Henri Lefebvre’s notion of a bureaucratic society of controlled consumption as a useful theoretical model for media studies researchers. Developing a model that draws on four processes of “controlled consumption”—instantiating, programming, alienating, and reorganizing—this article first explains how this theory and these components can provide useful analytic pathways for media research, and, in particular, the ongoing processes of moving media consumption onto streaming platforms. The second half of the article demonstrates one way this model might be used through a critical discourse analysis of how industry trade press framed the 2014 release of *The Interview* as an example of how members of the film industry responded to a crisis situation by shifting to online rentals under the goal of reorganizing distribution through controlled consumption processes. The article concludes by suggesting this theoretical model may have a number of further uses and developments for studying larger rearticulations and contextual transformations across various media industries.

*Keywords: controlled consumption, streaming, The Interview, distribution, media industries*

This article’s version of “controlled consumption” comes from sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s theory of a bureaucratic society of controlled consumption (BSCC), which he developed as part of his ongoing critique of everyday life in his book *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (Lefebvre, 1968/1971). This article examines how Lefebvre’s development of the BSCC provides a valuable model for studying not only how the circulation of content is bound up in notions of control—a well-documented give-and-take among producers, consumers, and intermediaries (Lobato, 2016; Morris & Powers, 2015)—but in particular how such conditions create varying modes of alienation and what Lefebvre called reorganization. Though this model has wide applicability for contemporary and historical analysis of the circulation of cultural goods, this article examines the ongoing transformation of media circulation via video on demand (VOD) and electronic sell-through (EST) markets like Google Play.

This article has two major halves. The first half is focused on theory building and explaining the model. I first provide a summary of Lefebvre’s critique of everyday life and the development of BSCC. I examine how Lefebvre’s concept has been used in some earlier work in communication and cultural studies

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before developing a four-part process for tracing how consumerism is brought under control. From there, the article transitions into an application of this theory, mapping the circulation of the 2014 Sony Pictures *The Interview* through a critical discourse analysis of trade press. The unique circumstances surrounding *The Interview*'s release included terrorist threats against theaters, the film's cancellation and, soon after, its release on a number of VOD and EST platforms, as well as a concurrent release in some independent theaters. As a moment of political, industrial, and social crisis, *The Interview* generated an unusually high amount of industry trade discourse, which is analyzed in relation to how freedom and control are articulated to consumerism. While this crisis's legacy may be limited, the controversies around the film offer an opportunity to use the BSCC to examine a snapshot of transformations related to VOD and EST platforms near the midpoint of the 2010s. The article's final sections demonstrate how the key issues of alienation and reorganization continue to matter for ongoing transformations in the digital circulation of film and television content. I conclude by suggesting controlled consumption can serve as a useful model for other studies as a way to frame how media companies use platforms to alienate consumers from ownership.

In traversing theoretical modeling and application, this article's primary objective is to demonstrate how Lefebvre's critical theory offers a useful tool for assessing the increasing taken-for-grantedness of streaming services in the larger context of various media industries, including film, television, and music. As a theorist who believed in the relationship between critique and transformation, Lefebvre provides a useful vocabulary for critical researchers sketching the contextual transformations of power relationships that manifest in media circulations. Though this article applies these theories to a particular moment in time and relates them to still-unfolding developments, these contextual issues of power, alienation, and change could be applied to other studies and circumstances.

### **Modeling "Controlled Consumption"**

Henri Lefebvre developed his critique of everyday life across three volumes of the *Critique of Everyday Life* as well as other works, among them, *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (Lefebvre, 1947/1992, 1961/2002, 1968/1971, 1981/2008). According to Elden (2004), Lefebvre drew from Marxist understandings of alienation to argue everyday life is a site of struggle; not only is alienation about how producers and consumers relate to one another in capitalism, as Marx put it in his more economic analysis, but it also pervades social relationships. In *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Lefebvre (1968/1971) argues everyday life has taken on characteristics of bureaucracy and economics, in that everything is calculated and numbered (Elden, 2004, pp. 115–116). Gardiner (2000) also emphasizes alienation in Lefebvre's work regarding how everyday life is a site of power, resistance, and control (p. 76), where humans may lose their capacities for agency under the authority given to calculation and rationalization.

As Featherstone (2007) explains in his overview of consumer culture and postmodernism, Lefebvre examines how power constructs experiences of consumption (p. 101). Consumption is, in other words, programmed. Lefebvre suggests that people spend their lives constrained via rigid and immobile social roles and consumption practices (Gardiner, 2000, p. 76), which in some way set limits on what is considered possible. This article similarly suggests that the stuff of culture becomes—via controlled consumption—constrained by the structuring of particular kinds of experiences. This entails, as explained below, removing capacities for people to do things with products such as films through digital rights management (DRM).

Lefebvre's critique of everyday life has had little uptake in communication, though it has a cadre of supporters and developers in cultural studies (Burkitt, 2004), which often focuses on issues related to daily life. Lefebvre's (1974/1991) work has arguably been more popular in fields such as geography and philosophy, where his ideas about the production of space have inspired critical thought in seminal works from scholars like Harvey (2003) and Soja (1996). Lefebvre's focus on the complexities of daily life, and his transformations of Marx's ideas about consumption and alienation, mark him as a potentially useful addition to critical communication theories interested in how forms of power structure and shape the possibilities to engage cultural goods.

My take-up of Lefebvre's "controlled consumption" in this article focuses on how media industries (here, in particular, the film industry) conceptualize their capacity for control, and how they in turn work to bring consumption under control. Beniger's (1986) historical analysis of an ongoing "crisis of control" resonates here. Beniger traced how changes in media technologies often destabilized existing relationships between producers and consumers, leading to various mechanisms and protocols to exercise greater economic and political control (p. 7). For Beniger, the ability for users to control the conditions of consumption exists within a broader desire in any number of industries (media or otherwise) to maintain control of these conditions through which products circulate.

More recently, Ted Striphas (2009) has explored the close connections between consumerism and control through his history of book culture and the publishing industry in the second half of the 20th century. Striphas identifies, among other things, a series of technological developments and industry protocols that sought to monitor, regulate, and control how books moved through space and what people could do with the books they purchased. Striphas turns to controlled consumption as a key theory. As Striphas notes: "Lefebvre was writing in the late 1960s, right around the time . . . machine-readable bar codes, stricter copyright statutes, and other instruments of control were only starting to be implemented within and beyond the book industry" (p. 180).

In his summary of BSCC, Striphas (2009) extracts four major components. First, BSCC relies on cybernetic systems, which allow for aspects related to production, exchange, and consumption to be managed. Second, these systems create programming, which entails "attempts to minimize—and, ideally, to eliminate—whatever freedom of choice may still exist in the realm of consumer culture" (p. 181). Third, this programming relies on obsolescence, where consumers have to repeatedly buy repeatedly breaking things, and everything is engineered for failure precisely to keep people purchasing (Pugh, 2013). Finally, there is reorganization, where the institutions that collectively represent BSCC "secure their power and authority significantly by troubling, acting on, and reorganizing specific practices of everyday life" (p. 182). This is, ultimately, the goal of BSCC: to set new conditions on what is possible in everyday life.

Striphas (2009) positions his arguments about book culture and publishing industries as "but one facet of a constellation of informally interconnected events" (p. 184). Here, I aim to refine his summary of controlled consumption and, in doing so, offer it as a model for analyzing how cultural goods like film and television are circulated through digital services in the 2010s, although I envision this as a widely applicable theory for other analysis. The relationships between consumption of media products and the desire in some way control how they move through culture operates as a "point of contestation" (Striphas, 2009, p. 185)

that is in no way unique to the 2010s, and has mutated in many ways since at least the advent of what are now collectively called the media industries. Lefebvre (1968/1971) acknowledges the "relativity" of BSCC (p. 75). He did not mean it as an absolute formation, but rather as a descriptive analytic: "an unbiased constructive attitude of mind based on practice and theoretical understanding" (Lefebvre, 1968/1971, p. 75). This relativity suggests the BSCC ought to be adapted and updated to fit the circumstances and practices seeking to reorganize everyday life in other conjunctures.

Like Striplas, I extract four major steps in the process of manufacturing "controlled consumption" in the 2010s. I keep some names and change others, out of a desire to adapt the model for media circulation in the 2010s, and to draw back in Lefebvre's focus on alienation.

1. Implementing a technical system. Again, Lefebvre called this "cybernetics," and drew from the work of Norbert Wiener (1948) and others (Lafontaine, 2007). Gardiner (2000) suggests "cybernetization" represented the "fetishization of technique" (p. 89), or the overdetermination of technology to meaningfully create change, but this does not quite explain why Lefebvre chooses this particular word. Bollmer (2018) usefully clarifies that the term derives from the Greek *kubernetes*, or steersman, and can be described as means of using communication as part of larger imperatives for control. The implementation of these systems often occurs alongside claims of democratization and availability, as well as efficiency. The first step to instigating controlled consumption, in somewhat paradoxical terms, is to make it seem like something that can make consumption more flexible in ways that ultimately work to command, or steer, how consumption occurs.
2. Programming of particular codes that govern how goods can be accessed. This is meant to further remove the possibility of being an "active" viewer who participates socially with others, and advocates more "passive consumption" (Gardiner, 2000, p. 90). As Lefebvre (1968/1971) summarizes the act of programming: "political and social activities converge to consolidate, structure, and *functionalize*" (p. 64, emphasis in original) daily life. This has affinities with Galloway's (2004) conceptualization of protocol, or the ways in which rules of conduct are built into technical systems.
3. Alienating individuals from the materials of culture. This alienation requires removing previously existing means of accessing and consuming media texts. After programming has been successfully established, variables and options can be stripped away. One example here is how Netflix does not provide physical media copies (such as DVDs) of many of its original programs. This can be compared with what Lefebvre describes as the technique of obsolescence, where consumers come to see products as always-already breaking. Nothing is permanently owned when all appliances are doomed to fail. So, too, does streaming media substitute ownership with access, where the ability to access texts and titles "on-demand" (Tryon, 2013) emerges as a cultural value facilitating the fourth and final step in the process of controlling consumption.

4. Reorganizing practices related to consumption in ways that favor control. In the context of streaming media companies, this entails a reliance on renting and subscribing as dominant models. Reorganization occurs when "power has become habitualized" (Gardiner, 2000, p. 94), such that the programming protocols are understood and accepted, and the alienation is not contested. Rita Felski (1999), for one, has traced the close links between habit and habitat, emphasizing the security that is often drawn from home space. Streaming platforms and VOD encourage accessing cultural goods from the comfort of the home; these reorganizing practices operate at the potential expense of consuming in public space.

These processes shift consumerism away from being relatively synonymous with agency and expression, where consumer goods are used as means to construct one's identity and social value as well as engage social relationships in ways considered to be meaningful. Rather than embracing capacities for expression, controlled consumption reorganizes and restricts the possibilities associated with those same goods and services. This process can take months or decades to accomplish. And even then, such reorganization is never ensured. This is why Lefebvre was so invested in the idea of resistance and transformation through critique. His writing foregrounded processes of struggle, and so, too, do I position controlled consumption not as a given state, but a contingent process open to disruption and disarticulation.

This refigured model of "controlled consumption" considers, for this particular article, the vantage point of increasingly ubiquitous and assumed access to digital files of cultural goods available across an array of platforms, services, and vendors. Lefebvre's critique of everyday life was always "provisional and flexible" (Gardiner, 2000, p. 79), in part because Lefebvre recognized the transformative project of critique required ongoing work. In offering a schematic for thinking with controlled consumption, I am not trying to evacuate it of its complexity. Though this version of Lefebvre's theory is in many respects a simplification of his argument, it provides researchers a way to track a particular set of processes through which consumption becomes controlled, which in turn contributes to the politics of everyday life.

### **Controlled Consumption for Media Studies**

It is worth asking why such a theoretical model is needed, especially when areas of communication and media research have developed robust empirical, anthropological, and archival approaches to studying how industries navigate change. My goal is not to arbitrate this work, or to suggest this is a superior theoretical approach. Rather, this model is a useful addition because of how it incorporates concepts from critical social theory, which can provide additional means of attenuating how ongoing transformations in the circulation of cultural goods affect how consumers imagine (and are imagined to have) agency and control over such goods.

For Lefebvre, again, the goal of critique is always transformative. Lefebvre was an advocate of locating and wrestling with contradictions, and control—extending the connection to Beniger (1986) above—can be usefully considered a contradiction: consumers ostensibly have more control over what they would like to watch on services like Netflix, with its thousands of titles and high-definition viewing, but greater control is simultaneously exerted over what consumers can do with these media products, such as limiting home video releases and locking files in ways that prevent screenshots and clips from being produced.

It is also important to explain why I consider Lefebvre's conceptual critique of everyday life as useful for media research. Acland (2003), for instance, has described the relationship between cinemagoing and everyday life, and others have attended to how movie theaters (Hassoun, 2016), video rental stores (Herbert, 2014), smartphone applications (Pold & Andersen, 2014), and mobile media (Hagood, 2019) are composed of habitual practices. Distribution and circulation protocols—as the means by which cultural goods are made available for consumption—also have structures and conditions informing, at least in part, how goods like movies are accessed, viewed, and otherwise used. This is especially true in terms of domestic media consumption, which Silverstone (1994) and others have noted for some time. Digital distribution and subscription services are ways to further regiment and commodify leisure under the guise of access and ease, extending a “manipulated way of relating to the world” (Gardiner, 2000, p. 84). When consumers do not own, but rather rent, the tools of their leisure, they lose what was perceived as their distinct value. Klinger's (2006) work on home video cultures, which explores in part the affective processes of collecting physical media artifacts such as VHS tapes and DVDs, is but one example of how ownership of material objects can transform the relationship between the consumer and the product (Hilderbrand, 2009).

The relationship between “consumption” and “control” has also been in a constant state of reconceptualization in relation to the emergence of VOD and EST markets since the late 2000s. At the time of *The Interview*'s release in late 2014, some phrases in media studies attempted to describe how, exactly, digital distribution transformed the relationships among producers, media texts, and audiences. These include, but are certainly not limited to, “on-demand culture” (Tryon, 2013), “post-network era” (Lotz, 2014), “distribution revolution” (Curtin, Holt, & Sanson, 2014), “connected viewing” (Holt & Sanson, 2013), “convergence culture” (Jenkins, 2006), and “digital disruption” (Iordanova & Cunningham, 2012). These and other terms exemplify a rearticulation in how media objects are commodified and consumed, where audiences would appear to have greater agency to access media texts. They reveal overlaps among academic researchers, industry press, and media practitioners, where these groups were developing a varied vocabulary for explaining and analyzing these shifts. Examining *The Interview* allows for a snapshot of shifting industry norms that help make sense of how the everyday practices of streaming in the early 2010s transformed into the streaming practices at the end of the 2010s.

Analysis of the transformations in digital processes of transmission and circulation have also been important in television studies. As Lotz (2014, 2018) has charted, notions of change and disruption have been endemic to the industries and technologies that comprise television for decades (if not since television's beginning). The particular disruptions of online circulation are part of ongoing, decades-long projects of experimentation across various studios, audiences, and intermediaries. Catherine Johnson (2019), in her description of “online TV,” also notes how the introduction of technological infrastructures like broadband Internet into television circulation speak to how there are no longer (if there ever were) essentialist means of defining any given medium, but rather there are many rapid changes characterizing how television might be understood and analyzed. Though controlled consumption, as a model, might be mapped onto particular moments in time as a way to assess ongoing conceptions of change, media industry scholars rightfully insist on change as a fundamental condition of any medium.

Ancillary markets, such as (depending on the time period) video rental stores, DVD purchases, and, now, streaming media services have posed their own set of negotiations for content distribution, but

the theater itself has also always been a disrupted and disruptive space. Recently, cell phone texting and other sorts of second screen use have served as motivation behind occasional calls to ban cell phones from movie theaters (Sims, 2016), while Hallinan and Reynolds (2019) have demonstrated how exhibitors use mobile apps as a way to cultivate audiences. These technologies are situated between consumerism and control, representing a number of possibilities or frustrations for theater management, advertisers, and patrons to set the terms for how the consumption of cultural goods is structured.

Discussions of the evolving nature of such structures is a prominent topic in media studies scholarship. In particular, a number of researchers have focused attention on how considerations of who audiences are, and how to understand them—some of the core questions of media and communication research—continue to transform through data collection projects (Cohn, 2016; Hessler, 2019). Lobato (2009) has demonstrated how digital distribution is entangled with problems of social stratification, and how VOD and EST marketplaces are just another of many “exclusionary technologies” that have always been used to police audiences (p. 175; Allen, 2005). Despite such exclusions, Braun’s (2013) analysis of the sociotechnical systems of online television distribution, for example, suggests “audiences for television are increasingly seen as exerting influence not simply as passive viewers, but as users and citizens” (p. 434).

Though “freedom” and “control” are occasionally imagined as binary options when it comes to the consumption of media objects, this literature—which is, of course, far from exhaustive—highlights how these two categories are never mutual or ensured, but rather overlap and blur. As the remainder of this article explores, Lefebvre’s theoretical model provides pathways for considering the consequences of these blurred relationships between freedom and control as they relate to the digital circulations of film and television.

### **Consumerism, Freedom, and Terrorism Around *The Interview***

Having described Lefebvre’s idea of controlled consumption, offered a four-part process for understanding it, and demonstrated how media circulation and consumption entails complex sets of negotiations, this section demonstrates how this model of controlled consumption—which moves through implementing, programming, alienating, and reorganizing—can be understood through the example of *The Interview*. *The Interview* is a political satire detailing a fictional CIA plot wherein a talk-show host (James Franco) and his producer (Seth Rogen) are enlisted to assassinate North Korean head of state Kim Jong-un (Randall Park). The film’s depiction of the assassination was considered to be a reason behind a cyberattack against Sony that leaked employees’ personal information, executives’ e-mail accounts, and digital copies of films. The fraught distribution of *The Interview* demonstrated how political crises could participate in larger restructurings of how film studios circulate their products through VOD and streaming media marketplaces. Moments of crisis, like the circulation of *The Interview*, are part of larger contextual transformations of what come to be more quotidian practices, like the proliferation of VOD and EST marketplaces. Indeed, Lefebvre (1968/1971) saw crisis—or, for him, social revolution—as a means to begin building toward the reorganization of daily life. The etymologic relationships between “crisis” and “critical” speak to the ongoing projects of critical theory to evaluate how crises are part of larger contextual transformations that might become routine and settled once a particular crisis has subsided (Striphas, 2013).

First, I provide background on the decision to cancel *The Interview* and how that decision became a rallying cry for free speech enthusiasts, leading to reinstating the theatrical release through independent exhibitors. This time line and the analysis of these decisions is largely reconstructed through a study of trade press and film blogs, emphasizing one of the official Hollywood trade outlets, *Variety*. As Perren (2004) has argued, these sources are invested in reproducing industry ideologies, and they are further “a primary means by which misconceptions about the structure, conduct, and performance of Hollywood are generated” (p. 18). Though *Variety* and others are useful for reconstructing the history and day-to-day reporting of the media industries, it is important to be mindful that they also have a vested interest in maintaining, rather than challenging, those industries.

Connor (2015) has examined related issues of “control and circulation” in *The Interview*—particularly, the images of Kim Jong-un’s assassination in the film—through a study of the corporate e-mails that were extracted and leaked as part of the Sony hack. The decision to use industry trade press rather than internal documents comes from my own commitments to using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) as a means to explore how crises are constructed publicly, and is no way meant to diminish or reduce the utility of Lefebvre’s BSCC model. Additionally, moments of crisis like the Sony hack and the terror threats against theaters showing *The Interview* create outside amounts of press discourse, as these outlets evaluate and report on constantly changing conditions.

There are limitations in relying on *Variety*, as it is largely an uncritical site of reportage intent on maintaining the dominant ideologies of various media industries (primarily film, television, and music); however, there are also some affordances for studying how they frame and report on events. For this article’s purposes, *Variety*’s reporting demonstrates how *The Interview*’s consumption was brought under control. This analysis draws on some imperatives of critical media industry studies (Havens, Lotz, & Tinic, 2009), which emphasizes the productive capacities of industry power, and which I here understand through controlled consumption’s focus on alienation and reorganization. *Variety* participates in the politics of the media industries as a whole: its reporters and editors work to amplify discourses that tether consumerism and freedom, and they also promote Sony’s decisions to experiment with a mode of controlled consumption. This is to say, *Variety* is also bent, however wittingly or consciously, toward endorsing control. To have content to write about requires Sony—and the other studios—to maintain some degree of control, profitability, and cultural legitimacy.

Such controversies offer generative sites for analysis in part because the disruptions they offer can be revealing of tensions at the heart of everyday thought and practice. Focusing on controversies, outliers, and otherwise atypical case studies allows—however counterintuitively—an opportunity to consider how the practices and structures of everyday life are always in the process of being transformed. The substantial amounts of discourse generated around something like *The Interview*, in other words, offers researchers opportunities to examine how the fluid relationships between freedom and control outlined in the previous sections are vocalized and negotiated.

### **Background: The Sony Hack and the Terrorist Threat**

In November 2014, terabytes worth of Sony employee information, e-mail correspondences, and digital files of films were leaked in what the trade and popular press, dubbed the Sony hack. A number of these



e-mails provided insight into the production of *The Interview*. In a forum discussion about the politics of the film (Kokas, Tryon, Gusterson, & Braun, 2016), Gusterson calls it “weaponized culture” (p. 717) and analyzes correspondences to assess the film’s political aims for Asian distribution (Shaw & Jenkins, 2019). On December 8, the group taking credit for the Sony hack demanded Sony “stop immediately showing the movie of terrorism which can break the regional peace and cause the war,” which *Variety* interpreted to mean *The Interview* (T. Johnson, 2014a, para. 1). Beginning on December 9, *Variety* turned its reporting of the Sony hack toward its potentially negative impact on *The Interview*’s box office, continuing their commitment to the business rather than the security or ideological practice of the film industry (Lang, 2014a).

The most substantial threat manifested on December 16, when the hacker group claimed, “We will clearly show it to you at the very time and places ‘The Interview’ be shown, including the premiere, how bitter fate those who seek fun in terror should be doomed. . . . Remember the 11th of September 2001” (Kastrenakes, 2014, para. 3). Later on December 16, Sony told theater owners they could individually decide not to screen *The Interview* (Lang, 2014b). By noon on December 17, *Variety* reported that four of the five largest exhibitors in the United States would “delay or drop” *The Interview* (Lang, 2014c). Less than an hour after Lang’s reported on exhibitors dropping the film, *Variety* hinted that Sony was considering a premium VOD release, which “would allow the studio to recoup some of the film’s \$142 million budget and tens of millions in promotion and advertising expenditures. It would also enable the studio to experiment with the potential of VOD, something it has been hesitant to do at the risk of angering major exhibitors” (Lang, 2014d, para. 2). Here, Lang discusses how one barrier to VOD release had been the studios’ licenses and relationships with theatrical exhibitors. This moment of crisis afforded Sony a means to circumvent traditional release window structures—which were in 2014 typified by a 90-day window between theatrical and home release (Nelson, 2013)—and continue experimenting with the viability of EST as a means of circulating their content.

### ***Consumerism as Freedom***

Controlled consumption always responds to and reorganizes extant modes of consumerism. During this crisis, consuming the film became associated with issues of free speech and free expression. Political figures such as former presidential candidate Mitt Romney seized on the film as an example of free speech issues and, in turn, American values (Charlton, 2014). On December 17, after the film’s cancelation, President Obama formally addressed the issue: “For now, my recommendation would be that people go to the movies” (T. Johnson, 2014b, para. 2). He went on to say, “Imagine if producers and distributors and others start engaging in self-censoring because they don’t want to offend the sensibilities of somebody whose sensibilities probably need to be offended. That’s not who we are. That’s not what America is about” (Laughland & Rushe, 2014, paras. 3–4). After Sony lawyer David Boies mentioned the company’s intent to distribute *The Interview*, despite having an unclear path for how to do so (Stedman, 2014), independent movie theaters began rallying to the film. Art House Convergence—which represents 250 independent screens—said in an open letter: “We want to offer our help in a way that honors our long tradition of defending creative expression” (McNary, 2014a, para. 4). By the end of December 23, more than 300 independent cinemas agreed to screen *The Interview* (McNary, 2014b). The surge in political significance placed on *The Interview*, as well as Sony’s perceived need to maintain relationships with at least some exhibitors, became the major threads of this “freedom” framing.

Consuming *The Interview* was rebranded as embodying national ideals of free expression. Christian Parkes, chief branding officer for Alamo Drafthouse, told the trade press, "People . . . are telling us that they believe it's their patriotic duty" (McNary, 2014c, para. 4). The patriotic fervor reached its height during an early Christmas morning screening at Los Angeles's Cinefamily theater, where Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg introduced the film, flanked by a man dressed as Uncle Sam wearing a Santa Claus cap, and a man dressed as Santa Claus wearing an Uncle Sam top hat, and positioned paying for a movie ticket as a politically meaningful action (McNary, 2014d). As Tryon has noted in his contribution to a forum conversation about the film, "*The Interview* placed renewed emphasis on moviegoing as an important social, cultural, and in this case at least, political activity" (Kokas et al., 2016, p. 722).

### **From Celebratory Expression to Controlled Consumption**

Free expression frames offer one thread for analyzing the film's consumption, but it tells only part of the story. Sony was continuing to capitalize on this crisis as a means to further its experimentation with online distribution platforms. The company had shown interest in such platforms since at least 2011 with the launch of digital repository UltraViolet, which is discussed as part of a larger suite of digital tools participating in processes of alienation below. In this section, I detail how this distribution strategy embodies processes of controlled consumptions, using the tenets of implementing, programming, alienating, and reorganizing as outlined above. In doing so, I move beyond this particular example to consider larger contextual transformations at play in controlled consumption.

#### ***Implementing***

Sony had worked to repair relationships with some exhibitors as screenings of the film rapidly ballooned to a patriotic "duty," but the company nevertheless launched [www.seetheinterview.com](http://www.seetheinterview.com) on the morning of December 24, announcing the film would be available to rent on that site, on Google Play, YouTube, and Microsoft's Xbox Video beginning at 10 a.m. Pacific Time for \$5.99, far less than a single theater ticket in most metropolitan areas. In the official announcement, Lynton said, "it was essential for our studio to release this movie, especially given the assault on our business and our employees by those who wanted to stop free speech. We chose the path of digital distribution first so as to reach as many people as possible on opening day" (Wallenstein & Spangler, 2014, para. 7).

As the events leading up to this decision indicate, releasing *The Interview* on a handful of VOD and EST services entailed further dividing exhibitors, especially the independent theaters that had agreed to screen the film after its first cancellation. On December 28, following the Christmas weekend, the film became available on iTunes for the same price of \$5.99. At the start of January, the film expanded to Walmart's VOD service Vudu, Sony's PlayStation Network, and a number of on-demand services affiliated with cable companies and Internet service providers, including Comcast, Time Warner Cable, DirecTV, AT&T U-verse TV, Dish Network, and Verizon FiOS TV (Spangler, 2014).

On December 24, Sony began implementing a particular instance of a larger cybernetic system—again, remembering that this particular understanding of cybernetics relies on the Greek etymology related to steering and governing. VOD and EST markets offer rationality and technical control, providing consumers

a means to access and engage the movie through a particular portal of commercial exchange. Such a decision was part of an ongoing process of building the infrastructure and support for VOD and EST markets; an area of content circulation in which Sony had been invested since at least 2010. Releasing the film on VOD one day before cinemas signaled the increasing importance of these marketplaces as viable sites of circulation. At the same time, the intermediaries like Google Play and Netflix control the title through their proprietary software, and generate valuable data reports about users who access and engage the title through their website and applications. The website provides a portal for Sony to not only circulate the film digitally and leverage VOD and EST services to “solve” political crises of expression and access, but also hopefully provide audience reports which can be used to make future decisions. Understanding how audiences engage such a system is necessary to develop the next step in the model, programming.

### **Programming**

After implementing what was imagined to be a technical solution, its value needed to be further legitimated. The implementation of this system also drew on existing programming to make it legible for consumers. VOD and EST had been increasingly regular components of media consumption. For example, iTunes launched its rental service in 2008, Netflix began offering titles for streaming in 2007, and digital file service UltraViolet premiered in 2011. *The Interview* was able to succeed in participating in this version of controlled consumption because it drew on—and deepened—an existing technical system. Sony’s decision to release the film via [www.seetheinterview.com](http://www.seetheinterview.com) allowed the studio to assert digital distribution as a way to capitalize on the movie’s perceived political and cultural value. Here, a different sort of freedom—the freedom to access—is offered in place of free expression.

It is important to recognize *The Interview* was just one of a series of opportunities for studios to experiment with how to manage and navigate the transformations of media consumption practices during the mid-2010s. The film was positioned as a testing ground for how these transformations create additional possibilities for circulating content in the midst of crisis while maintaining the social bonds of media cultures. For example, Rogen, Franco, and Goldberg hosted a live-tweet session of the film on the Sunday after its release, which led Twitter’s head of U.S. talent, Lara Cohen, calling the social networking site the “#WorldsBiggestMovieTheater” (Stelter, 2014). Live tweeting attempted to recreate cinemagoing through second screen practices (Svensson & Hassoun, 2016), and became part of *The Interview*’s “political consumerism” (Gil de Zúñiga, Copeland, & Bimber, 2014). These programming efforts demonstrate how the imperatives of free expression are channeled through digital services. “Freedom” of consumption becomes the alibi by which “control” of consumption is instantiated and deepened. Such a phenomenon, especially when it comes to tracking audiences, is of course nothing new. As Napoli (2011) has explored, conceptions of who audiences are, what they do, and how they might be analyzed changes concurrently with the development of “new audience information systems” capable of “capturing alternative approaches to audiences” (p. 150).

#WorldsBiggestMovieTheater helps negotiate the programming, showing consumers who may be worried about abandoning the social experience of cinema that they can adequately recreate this sociality through the Internet. This serves as just one example of how programming is performed. Engaging with a

hashtag also operates as a way for consumers to be tracked and monitored, their opinions extracted and used as part of data analytics for marketers to assess how consumers value and engage their products.

### ***Alienating***

As programming works to train consumers to anticipate, perform, and enjoy this mode of controlled consumption, it eventually leads to alienation. In this example, I understand alienation to mean the process by which consumers become further removed from the physical media object. Alienation is a mode of control that serves to separate people from the products of culture. If physical products like DVDs and VHS tapes might reasonably be said to have brought consumers closer to the materials of media culture, VOD and other digital circulation strategies sever material ownership and replace it with various sorts of locked rentals or subscription services (Gillespie, 2007).

There are economic motivations to alienation. Steirer (2015) suggests digital services such as UltraViolet—a cloud service for storing digitally purchased copies of Hollywood films—challenge traditional conceptions of media retailers and formats, largely because they are attempting to maintain economic imperatives through EST and other modes of online buying. For Steirer, UltraViolet helps establish “various forms of closed market/design models” (p. 187) for moderating everyday consumption, closing down the manipulability of files and revoking some freedoms users once experienced with the content they bought and owned. Again, the freedoms associated with consuming movies online are also programming alienation into acts of consumption.

*The Interview* was not just about the creation of politicized viewing communities built around the ostensible celebration of social ideals such as freedom of expression. As research into similar platforms has noted (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016; Vonderau, 2019), digital distribution allows various data collection practices and analytics to be operationalized. Sony’s ability to capitalize on the tensions between exhibitors on the one hand and free speech celebrants on the other hand allowed it to experiment with the viability of digital distribution through its own website ([www.seetheinterview.com](http://www.seetheinterview.com)), where it could gather precise download numbers, geolocational metadata, access times, and browser information, among others. To paraphrase Striphas (2010), this purportedly offers insight into not only what people watch, but how they watch. Such practices, I suggest, are part of a larger arc of alienating consumers from cultural goods.

These processes demonstrate the important overlaps between programming and alienating—the former often operates to enhance the latter. Whereas home entertainment products like VHS tapes and DVDs were (relatively) easy to copy and manipulate, these digital streaming files are comparatively harder to engage. Consider Netflix’s lack of DVD release strategy for much of its original programming. While some high-profile shows like *Stranger Things* and *House of Cards* have had DVD and Blu-ray releases, others like *Mindhunter* have not. Many of Netflix’s high-profile films, such as *The Other Side of the Wind* (2018) and *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) have not (as of this writing) been released on any physical media format. Essentially, this forces consumers to continue subscribing to the service. Additionally, Netflix has introduced various DRM measures that prevent consumers from engaging with the objects on the platform. Users cannot take screenshots of still images or record clips from Netflix shows without finding workarounds, in effect circumventing the digital locks that have been placed on this content in the name of protecting

intellectual property. Again, this positions consumption within control-based protocols operating to secure how and in what ways copyrighted cultural works can be engaged.

### **Reorganizing**

*The Interview* was one part of a larger arc of legitimizing the ability to convert cultural production into a controlled model based on sell-through markets, subscription services, and rental options. This method of controlling the flow of media content through digital marketplaces is, ultimately, why the discourses of freedom around *The Interview* were so important in the trade press. Though online marketplaces masqueraded as the province of fluidity and access—supposedly giving control to a subscriber to time-shift and place-shift consumption—such access also entails rearticulated methods of control. Netflix’s refusal to release most of its original films and series on physical media, as well as the emergence of dedicated streaming services like CBS All Access and Disney Plus suggest a larger industrial logic of proprietary control that came into clearer shape by the end of the 2010s (Seitz, 2019).

This continues to extend the alienation described above, manifesting it in various other sites and circumstances. Take, for example, the CBS All Access subscription platform. CBS has launched several high-profile shows—including *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017) and a reboot of *The Twilight Zone* (2019)—that are unavailable to watch legally unless one subscribes to the CBS All Access service. Similarly, Disney Plus aggregates all Disney-owned content—including popular titles from Marvel Studios and Lucasfilm—as well as houses subscriber-only television series and movies. Again, this is a controlled consumption that reorganizes circulation toward subscription. Subscription services transform renting toward an ongoing process of paying for access in perpetuity, rather than offering a means to own or collect versions of these goods. In this subscription-dominant system, Disney’s production of *The Lady and the Tramp* (2019) only appears on Disney Plus, as does its live-action Star Wars television series *The Mandalorian* (2019). If Sony engaged some processes of controlled consumption for *The Interview*, drawing on existing implementations and programming to continue pushing streaming content as a viable platform for release, then Disney Plus and similar platforms demonstrate an extension of the alienation process that is continuing to reorganize the everyday practices of media consumption toward this version of control. The rise of these variegated subscription services demonstrates the viability of using digital distribution rather than traditional models of distribution and dissemination.

### **Conclusion**

In navigating these tensions among crisis, transformation, and the quotidian within media studies, this article has argued Henri Lefebvre’s theory of controlled consumption offers a useful model for studying the flow of cultural goods amid the increasing plurality of online markets and services. Drawing from Lefebvre’s ideas about consumerism and everyday life provides useful framing for examining how, for example, media industries draw on emergent technologies to develop additional means of controlling the flow and circulation of cultural goods. In updating some of the existing work on Lefebvre, as well as revisiting his work on the BSCC, I have offered a four-part process for tracing controlled consumption: Implementing (of the system), programming (of how the system works), alienating (of consumers from cultural goods), and reorganizing (of everyday life and wider practices of consuming).

In mapping this model onto contemporary issues in media circulation, this article has analyzed trade press related to *The Interview*'s circulation to trace frames equating consumerism with freedom and control with industry power (which, for *Variety* at least, is perceived to be a good thing). As this analysis suggested, *Variety*'s ideological position amplifies the supposed need for controlled consumption. In exploring a particular manifestation of controlled consumption, this article focused on the decision to relaunch *The Interview* as a digital release amid frames of civic consumption, patriotism, and American ideals of expression. *The Interview* participated not just in the immediate crises of the Sony hack and terrorist threats against movie theaters but in a larger and ongoing struggle of circulating cultural goods through digital platforms that took place well before, and continued well after, this moment in late 2014. As the processes related to media consumption and ownership in the 2010s shifted, that which was once celebrated as user "freedom" gave way to more instances of corporate "control."

The particular utility of Lefebvre's model comes from the specific focus on "control" as a means of proliferating alienation in the name of reorganizing associations between consumers and cultural goods. As subscription-based modes of access to media content continue to shift this terrain, focusing on alienation can permit more studies to insist on the sorts of everyday transformation Lefebvre found to be so important. The model of controlled consumption this article proposes entails charting the processes by which consumerism is placed under control, following steps of implementing, programming, alienating, and reorganizing. The gerund form of these words is intentional and indicate the ongoing and contingent nature of these practices. Though I have charted this through largely through one set of discourses (industry trade press) and one example (*The Interview*) that exist within a larger process of change, media researchers can draw on and deepen this model for other studies and analysis. Examining experimental moments of crisis like the circulation of *The Interview* discursively provides one possible way of mapping how implementation of particular plans leads to alienation, and I do not mean to use this article to delineate limits on the proper or improper uses of my adaptation of Lefebvre. Rather, this is meant as a starting point for continuing to develop this theoretical tool across other complementary or contradictory case studies.

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