Disrupting Wisdom 2.0: The Quest for “Mindfulness” in Silicon Valley and Beyond

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Abstract

In early 2014 activist Amanda Ream and members of Eviction Free San Francisco disrupted the fifth annual Wisdom 2.0 conference, at which Silicon Valley leaders discuss the benefits of ‘mindfulness’ practices. It was another confrontation between working-class residents of San Francisco and the technology employees who have gentrified their neighborhoods. A member of the East Bay Meditation Center in Oakland, Ream’s actions garnered support from other ‘socially engaged’ Buddhists from Berkeley and elsewhere. Secular critics have likewise questioned the appropriation of Buddhist practices by corporations whose business practices and

products arguably undermine the cultivation of mindfulness. This article intervenes in these debates by outlining an approach called Contemplative Media Studies, which integrates critical media studies with the emerging field of Contemplative Studies. I argue that market imperatives have favored a corporate-friendly understanding of mindfulness that perpetuates structural injustice, and conclude that an expanded notion of *civic mindfulness* must include the revitalization of journalism and the development of non-commercial media systems.

About the Author

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1. Shouting Wisdom through a Bullhorn

On the morning of February 15, 2014, Amanda Ream zipped up a bag containing a protest banner emblazoned with the words "Eviction Free San Francisco." Over the previous several months, similar banners had appeared at events organized by this self-described "direct action group whose mission is to help stop the wave of evictions in San Francisco" (Eviction

Free San Francisco 2014). With fellow activists in tow, Ream headed for the fifth yearly installment of the Wisdom 2.0 conference, where Silicon Valley leaders discuss the benefits of mindfulness, meditation, and yoga. A deeply felt “ambivalence” about the corporate appropriation of Buddhist mindfulness practices had led Jay Michaelson, an attendee at the previous year’s conference, to describe Wisdom 2.0 as “the conference many Buddhists... love to hate” (Michaelson 2013). Ream was no exception. A union organizer, member of Oakland’s East Bay Meditation Center, and participant in the Dedicated Practitioners Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, she aimed to expose the irony of discussing ‘corporate mindfulness’ amid the tech industry’s gentrification of local neighborhoods.

Allegedly gaining entrance by using “fabricated badges,” the protestors sat amid unknowing attendees before taking the conference stage during a panel titled “3 Steps to Build Corporate Mindfulness the Google Way” (MediaShower 2014a). As three activists held up the banner, Ream handed out flyers that read, “Thank you for your practice. We invite you to consider the truth behind Google and the tech industry’s impact on San Francisco.” Meanwhile Erin McElroy, self-described as “an anarchist, an anti-capitalist” and member of the Heart of the City activist collective, chanted through a bullhorn: “Wisdom means stop displacement! Wisdom means stop surveillance!” (Bowles 2014).

The details of the incident are a matter of dispute. Afterwards, Bill Duane, Senior Manager of Google’s Well Being and Sustainable High Performance Development Programs, encouraged audience members to “Check in with your body and see what’s happening. What it’s like to be around conflict with people with heartfelt ideas that may be different than what we’re thinking.” The official conference weblog framed Duane’s response as the epitome of mindfulness. “What had felt like an emotionally jarring interruption was transformed into a moment of awareness and peace,” read one post (MediaShower 2014b). Acknowledging the issue of gentrification, another official post denied any intentional censorship and promised that “rather than create more anger and division” the organizers would “focus on the creation and support of constructive dialogue around pressing social concerns like this one” (MediaShower 2014a).

By contrast, Ream (2014) claimed on the website of the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* that “the activists and the message of Eviction Free San Francisco were disappeared without a word,

censored from the livestream of the event” and subsequently “marched out of the hall by angry conference staff.” Video posted on YouTube by Heart of the City (2014) shows the protestors engaged in “a literal game of tug of war for the banner, which the activists won.”

On the website of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Katie Loncke (2014)—who had attended the first Wisdom 2.0 conference in 2010—took issue with Duane’s handling of the protest. “What about the mindfulness, happiness, and well-being of the people mining coltan in the DRC, or the people assembling iPhones at the infamous Foxconn sweatshops? I mean, if we exclude them from the picture, then yes, we can calmly check in with our bodies... But such deep exclusion invites deep delusion.” Ream (2014) likewise described Duane’s response as “a case study in spiritual bypassing,” since “no one addressed the issues we were raising, not then or later on in the conference.”

Many attendees felt torn. Jakey Toor (2014), who teaches in the San Francisco Unified School District, admitted to feeling “badly for the well intentioned and, in my opinion, awesome Google presenters.” Yet she expressed full support for the protestors as well, having witnessed the impact of gentrification on local families—including her own. “It was so strange,” she noted, “this feeling of being split right down the middle.”

Some Buddhist practitioners argue that the controversy over Wisdom 2.0 represents a “split right down the middle” of contemporary American Buddhism. On the one hand, a consumer-friendly approach that views commercial media as a catalyst for personal enlightenment; on the other, a socially engaged critique that condemns the same corporations for business practices and services that undermine the cultivation of mindfulness. Stephen Schettini (2013, personal communication), who was ordained in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, suggests that these debates represent yet another instance of how conservative and liberal elements arise within every tradition as it becomes institutionalized, with the former acquiescing to the political-economic status quo and the latter embracing radical social action.

Buddhism in its early institutionalized forms accommodated itself to state power in China, Korea, and Japan—a tendency echoed in later developments such the Soto Zen school (Loy 2013, p.411; Orzech 1998, p.3). From a Weberian perspective, the melding of corporate power and Buddhist philosophy is historically unsurprising—as is the demand by liberal practitioners to resist “this-worldly politics” and return to an original, transcendent experience

(Orzech 1998, p.5). Proponents of “social engaged Buddhism” or “critical Buddhism” clearly favor a liberal approach, which they frame as more authentic. Schettini, for example, views corporate mindfulness as “problematic” since it neglects the commitment to social transformation that he believes was central the Buddha’s thinking. David Brazier (2002, p.35) argues likewise that “the Buddha was strident in his criticism of the religious, social, and personal mores of his day, 2,000 years before Luther.”

Such claims about Buddhism’s authentic origins are problematic, however, since historians’ knowledge of Buddha is limited to documents written centuries after his death (Orzech 1998, p.5). Even a scholar-practitioner like David Loy (2013, p.403-404), who articulates similar concerns about corporate culture, argues that strictly speaking there is no “Buddhist equivalent” of the “Abrahamic emphasis on justice.” While religious experience clearly has socially transformative potential, therefore, the search for untouched origins is itself a politically-imbued and socially situated endeavor, as is all religious experience (Orzech 1998, p.5).

For their part, proponents of corporate mindfulness programs argue that their programs never claimed to be Buddhist in the first place. Chade-Meng Tan, the mindfulness program leader from Google who sat next to Bill Duane during Ream’s protest, draws directly from Buddhist texts but insists that “everything can be completely secular” since “there is no religion associated with bringing attention to the breath” (Gelles 2012). It would be inaccurate to describe the spiritual dimensions of Silicon Valley’s tech subculture as Buddhist *per se*, since they are an amalgamation of Protestantism, Buddhism, Gnosticism, New Age spirituality, and secular humanism (Geraci 2010). In fact, critical forms of Buddhism like Schettini’s and Brazier’s are arguably just as much a product of Western culture as Chade-Meng Tan’s.

Nevertheless, if the quest to strip religious experience of its worldly trappings and return to an allegedly authentic practice is problematic, so too is the quest to strip experience of its transcendent dimensions in order to fit it neatly within the confines of dominant political-economic ideologies. As Orzech (1998, p.5) argues, “we must recognize that religious experience—transcendence—is articulated in and through the world and that it involves power in the broadest sense of that term.” While the question of what constitutes authentic Buddhist practice is a matter of theological and historical debate beyond the scope of this article, questions

about socio-economic justice—a staple of critical media scholarship—are not. Nor are questions about the “integrity of practice”—for example, how to adopt traditional practices without reducing them to “narrow instruments” or neglecting their “broader transformative potential.” (Center for Contemplative Mind in Society 2013, p.2). The latter concern, as we shall see, is a matter of ongoing reflection among scholars within the emerging field of Contemplative Studies, which employs empirical and social-scientific methods to understand the physiological, psychological, and social implications of contemplative practice.

I spoke with Chade-Meng Tan about these concerns in late 2014 at the International Symposium for Contemplative Studies (ISCS) in Boston (Healey 2014b). He acknowledged that while his programs have successfully addressed individual stress reduction, they have fallen short in addressing questions of compassion—the social and economic issues at the heart of the Wisdom 2.0 protests. Nevertheless, he insisted that if Google’s profit motive were ever to interfere with his goal of “democratizing enlightenment,” it would be Google’s bottom line that would suffer—not its users or anyone else. He maintains that there is no fundamental contradiction between the corporate-driven digital economy and the practice of mindfulness.

The discussion that follows challenges the latter claim through an approach that I call Contemplative Media Studies, which integrates concepts from critical media studies and contemplative scholarship. While I draw from scholar-practitioners of a critical Buddhist orientation, this is a reflection of ideological resonance rather than theological identification. My goal is not to outline a Buddhist critique of digital culture. Instead it is to expand political-economic critique by emphasizing the role of spiritual practice and belief in the digital economy; and to expand contemplative scholarship by applying the concept of mindfulness to media systems and institutions. I contend that critical media scholarship has, all along, sought a more ‘mindful’ media environment that responds with integrity to the concerns of the disenfranchised.

2. Contemplative Media Studies: An Approach

While its corporate application has garnered attention in recent years, the academic study of mindfulness began in the 1980s and has flourished since the formation of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (<http://www.contemplativemind.org>) in the 1990s. Jon Kabat-

Zinn (1994, p.4) has been influential in this field, and his definition of mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” is widely cited (Gethin 2011, p.269). Medical and psychological applications have largely steered such research, and subsequent operational definitions emphasize the acceptance of one’s thoughts, feelings, and sensations (Bishop et al. 2004, p.232). Contemplative Studies has expanded the application of such concepts to the fields of education, economics, and jazz studies—though still with a focus on personal experience.

While these applications are largely secular in nature, leaders in this field have nevertheless taken seriously the concern that secular applications may lead to a “denaturing” of the concept of mindfulness (Williams & Kabat-Zinn 2013, p.11-13; Grossman & Van Dam 2011, p.223). Ron Purser (2015, p.24), an ordained Zen Dharma teacher in the Korean Zen Taego Order, argues that through their individualist focus medical-scientific and corporate mindfulness applications have stripped mindfulness practice of the ethical and philosophical components that could address institutional and systemic causes of human suffering. With such concerns in mind, scholars of Contemplative Studies including Purser, David Forbes, Judith Simmer-Brown, and David Levy have offered strategies for preserving the “integrity of practice” at such forums as the 2013 meeting of the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) and the 2014 meeting of the International Symposium for Contemplative Studies (ISCS).

At the 2013 ACMHE conference, I outlined a program for Contemplative Media Studies, which I defined as “the application of contemplative practices and principles to the critical analysis of media technologies, content, and institutions” (Healey 2013b). This approach seeks to “examine media as intellectual technologies, critiquing the impact of digital power structures on the formation of self-identity and the perception of reality, while providing a moral compass for the development of ‘normative technologies’ built upon values of justice, stewardship, and openness” (2013b). The approach answers McChesney’s (2007, p.72-73) call for further research in the vein of Neil Postman’s ‘media ecology’ approach, which examines the “biases” of digital technologies in their impact on human development. At the same time, it follows Clifford Christians’ (1997) approach to media ethics by evaluating technologies and institutions according to universal principles discernable across multiple traditions. Like the broader field of Contemplative Studies, this approach does not claim to be Buddhist *per se*. In adapting and

applying contemplative principles, however, it expands the long-standing commitment of critical media scholarship to addressing issues of political-economic justice.

In this way Contemplative Media Studies addresses a gap in media studies literature that stems from the overwrought debates between political-economy and cultural studies in the mid-1990s, which created a rift between institutional and policy analysis, on the one hand, and ethnographic or audience-focused research on the other. As a subject of analysis, religion typically fell within the presumed territory of the latter approach. As a result, there is scant literature that integrates political-economic or institutional analysis with an examination of the religious dimensions of digital culture.

The relevance of political-economic critique to digital culture is well-established. Years before the consequential *Telecommunications Act* of 1996, which arguably laid the groundwork for the commercialization of the Internet, McChesney (1993) argued for accessible, politically engaged critical scholarship that offers a direct critique of capitalism. His work often notes the religious undertones of pro-market rhetoric, for example describing the 1990s as a period wherein “free market theology” became “the reigning civic religion” in the U.S. (McChesney 1999, p.67). More recently (2013) he frames the assumption of market infallibility as a veritable ‘catechism.’ These are largely rhetorical gestures, however, using the metaphor for emphasis without substantively engaging the relationship between religious and economic ideologies.

Meanwhile, scholarship in media and religion has favored a cultural approach that neglects institutional concerns. Hoover (2006) explicitly called for an approach focusing on religious adherents’ interpretation and use of media “objects” in their practices, relegating institutional questions to secondary status. Drawing from McChesney (1999), Clark (2007, p.24-29) critiques this approach, suggesting that its implied notion of ‘semiotic democracy’ over-emphasizes consumer agency without acknowledging structural constraints that limit available content. Nevertheless, the audience-centered approach is dominant in research focusing on religion in traditional media (Hendershot 2004) and on the Internet (Campbell 2005). Recent research on Buddhism follows the ‘religion-online’ approach by describing how practitioners establish spaces for practice in digital environments like Second Life (Connelly 2013) without asking whether Buddhist principles might call into question their commercial basis or cognitive impact. Media studies analyses that address normative questions of this sort are predominantly

Christian in orientation (Garner 2013), while important scholarship addressing such issues from a Buddhist perspective has arisen from outside of media studies altogether—namely Ron Purser’s critique of corporate mindfulness, which stems from his research in organizational management theory.

By incorporating a critical political-economic perspective, Contemplative Media Studies addresses these gaps in media studies scholarship by focusing on issues of institutional power, which both Contemplative Studies and ‘media and religion’ scholarship tends to overlook. To apply these principles to macro-level institutional analysis entails calling into question the ‘catechism’ of market capitalism as the driving ideology of digital culture. Such questioning allows us to discern tensions between contemplative principles and the dynamics of commercial markets. Just as scholars in the academy at large are hesitant to question the “elephant in the digital room” (McChesney 2013, p.12)—i.e. market ideology—so too are many within Contemplative Studies. Ron Purser has been a vocal and well-received exception, challenging proponents of corporate mindfulness for unmooring contemplative practices from their ethical foundations in ways that transform them into tools of complacency.

At the same time, critical political economy can benefit from contemplative principles. As Loy (2013, p.401) argues, Buddhism’s traditional concern for personal transformation and the West’s concern for social justice “need each other” if we are to address both individual and structural sources of suffering (or *dukkha*). While the redistribution of wealth is a legitimate aim within critical political economy, strategies for objective institutional reforms may amount merely to a piecemeal treatment of symptoms if they neglect the subjective dimensions of political-economic reality. “Even the best possible economic and political system cannot be expected to function well if the people within that system are motivated by greed, aggression, and delusion—the ‘three fires’ or ‘three poisons’ that Buddhism identifies as unwholesome motivations,” Loy (2013, p.404) argues. Concepts such as the “three poisons,” which resonate with critical approaches to media ecology, provide “ways to address the personal *dukkha* built into the delusions of consumerism, and the structural *dukkha* built into institutions that have attained a life of their own” (Loy 2013, p.419).

Buddhism is uniquely insightful in terms of its rigorous and systematic inquiry into the nature of consciousness, but it is not alone in its insistence on the importance of personal or

subjective transformation. Elsewhere (Healey & Omachonu 2009) I have argued for integrating Jacques Ellul's Christian anarchism with the structural-procedural emphasis of Jurgen Habermas. In fact, Habermas' approach is helpful in bridging political economy and contemplative approaches. His concern for mass media is central to political-economic critique (McChesney 2007, p.71-72), but his work moves beyond typical Marxian antipathy to religious belief by embracing the latter as a source of motivation for moral engagement in the public sphere. While Habermas engaged Christianity more directly, his goal of rescuing the project of the Enlightenment is nevertheless consistent with Critical Buddhism, which understands that Buddhism and the West "share the same idea of enlightenment, namely as a quest for liberation from ignorance and domination" (Hubbard & Swanson 1997, p.305). By highlighting these points of resonance, Contemplative Media Studies moves beyond the denouncement of elite abuses of power to an understanding of the personal and collective delusions that lead to such abuses in the first place.

Of course, as Loy (2013, p.417) notes, "we have much more powerful institutions than in the time of the Buddha." We are left to translate millenia-old ideas into today's digital context. The problem here is not one of appropriation *per se*, but rather of the *ethics* of appropriation. In positing a contemplative approach to media studies, I contend that such appropriation must not extract ideas self-servingly or single-mindedly. Instead, such principles must be applied with integrity by addressing their individual as well as institutional implications. Without a focus on the structural sources of suffering, contemplative practices may simply serve as stress-reduction techniques for a privileged minority.

In the analysis that follows, I first argue that market capitalism, as a powerful cultural ideology, tends to colonize individual religious practice in ways that domesticate the socially transformative potential of religion. This has occurred to unfortunate effect in the development of corporate mindfulness programs, where practices derived from religious tradition have served primarily as stress-reduction technologies for an elite population within an otherwise inequitable economic landscape. I adapt the metaphor of the "black-nosed Buddha" to argue that even as Silicon Valley companies deploy mindfulness programs for the benefit of their employees, they continue to develop platforms and services that exacerbate the problems of greed, aggression, and delusion on a collective level. This approach avoids the twin pitfalls of cynical skepticism

and naïve celebration that typically accompany the commercial exploitation of both digital technologies and mindfulness techniques. Understanding digital media and mindfulness alike in terms of their potential as public goods, this approach opens a more robust conversation about the meaning of both personal mindfulness and collective or civic mindfulness in the emerging digital economy.

3. The Great (Digital) Reversal

The debates about the “Wisdom 2.0” conference reflect concerns about the integrity of religious practice that have long faced religious communities as they assess the proper relationship between their beliefs and the market. The market, buoyed by popular belief in its inherent beneficence, asserts itself in ways that trouble the ability of religious communities to challenge established power. Such was the case in the early days of radio broadcasting, as both mainline and evangelical churches softened their messages to please advertisers (Schultze 2003). With the decline of institutional religion and the emergence of ‘quest culture,’ individuals turned to popular media in search of a more direct experience of the sacred (Roof 1999). Here again, the logic of the marketplace has prevailed. An ever-expanding ‘spiritual marketplace’ has encouraged acquiescence to established power structures among industry-friendly activists like Bono, while sidelining voices that employ anti-corporate rhetoric in their demands for social justice (Einstein 2012, p.81-87).

Such was the case for Buddhist ideas as they increased in popularity among successful American entrepreneurs. In the 1960s, the counter-culture sought ecstatic experiences through the psychedelic music and drug experimentation. Changes in U.S. immigration laws generated interest in east-Asian philosophy (Roof 1999, p.73), where counter-culture types found ideas that resonated with their experiences. Composer John Cage’s avant-garde protest of heteronormative culture, inspired by the Zen teacher D.T. Suzuki, gave way to the more commercially palatable east-Asian flirtations of the Beatles, whose “hunger for transcendence” (Turner, S. 2006, p.viii) led them to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi*. The latter was the sole book remaining on Steve Jobs’ iPad when he took his last family trip to Hawaii in 2011 (Robinson 2013, p.75).

Counter-cultural leaders from Timothy Leary to Grateful Dead lyricist John Perry Barlow embraced the liberating potential of personal computers as technologies for the transformation of consciousness. Positing consciousness as primary, such leaders distanced themselves from the ‘agonistic’ politics of groups like the Weathermen (Turner, F. 2006, p.35). At least initially, they remained skeptical of corporate power and rejected crass commercialism, assuming that “the revolutionary nature of the technology could trump the monopolizing force of the market” (McChesney 2013, p.105).

Such faith in technology led to a shift in political alliances, however, as counter-culture leaders and economic conservatives both came to regard market-born technologies as “natural” and inevitable (Turner, F. 2006, p.224). By the mid-1990s counter-culture elites allied themselves with “free-market ideologues” like Newt Gingrich, who played a key role in crafting the *Telecommunications Act of 1996* (McChesney 2013, p.105). Echoing the shift toward commercialization in radio broadcasting earlier in the century, politicians and industry leaders had quietly privatized the infrastructure of the Internet (McChesney 2013, p.104) before crafting legislation that solidified the power of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs. Even Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who had once denounced advertising-based search engines as “inherently biased toward the advertisers” (quoted in McChesney 2013, p.102), soon developed the most successful ad-placement model in the industry.

As epitomized by Jobs—the mythical figurehead of digital culture—one might assume that such cases of ‘capture’ by market forces are a reflection of individual moral failure. Biographer Walter Isaacson (2011, p.262) suggests as much, claiming that while Jobs had once cited his Zen teacher Kobun Chino in arguing against materialist attachment to consumer products, “in the end Jobs’ pride in the objects he made overcame his sensibility that people should eschew being attached to such possessions.” Such pride also precipitated temperamental rants against both products and “shithead” employees (2011, p.561). Noting his treatment of employees as well as the labor conditions in Apple’s Chinese factories, *Wired* columnist Steve Silberman (2011) suggests that “a more skillful practitioner” of *zazen* might have “tried to find ways to bring out the genius in his employees without humiliating them—and certainly would have found ways of manufacturing products that didn’t cause so much suffering for impoverished workers in other countries.”

Though individual failings are important, Loy (2013, p.419) suggests that such developments demonstrate that “the system has attained not only a life of its own but its own *cetanā* volitions, quite apart from the motivations of the individuals who work for it and who will be replaced if they do not serve that institutional motivation.” From a political-economic perspective, McChesney (2013, p.28) argues that while companies like Apple and Google “were begun by idealists” who rejected commercialism, the “unforgiving logic” of the market requires managers to “internalize the necessary values” for market success. In the process, “any qualms about privacy, commercialism, avoiding taxes, or paying low wages to Third World factory workers” are “quickly forgotten” (2013, p.28).

Jobs’ ruthless personal temperament is an effective metaphor for the shadow-side of corporate mindfulness programs. While Wisdom 2.0 organizers lauded the Google panelists for handling the disruption with “grace and compassion,” (MediaShower 2014b), McChesney (2013, p.28) reminds us that “you can be sure that somewhere their capital is being ruthlessly managed to maximize return.” Suffering caused by the aggressive expansion of capital remains an unspoken reality in the U.S. Meanwhile, quotations from Foxconn CEO Terry Gou’s work philosophy “adorn the factory walls” where Apple products are manufactured, reading “Growth, thy name is suffering” and “A harsh environment is a good thing” (Chan 2013, p.89).

The confluence of market entrepreneurialism and east-Asian spirituality thus represents a ‘great reversal’ from the early public-interest vision of the Internet.¹ What was once a forum for open collaboration in an explicitly non-commercial setting became a primary means of revenue extraction by proprietary platforms. Through gradual concessions to the advertising industry—in business models and in the technical standards underlying web browsers – “the nature and logic of the Internet had been turned on its head” (McChesney 2013, p.147). As commercial imperatives colonized the platform itself, they selected winners and losers in the burgeoning spiritual marketplace. Spearheaded by erstwhile gurus like Jobs, market dynamics sifted east-Asian ideas—new entrants into the American cultural milieu—appropriating Buddhist and Hindu practices in service of the cult-status branding of digital products (Robinson 2013, p.87).

The resulting consumer-friendly ideology stands in contrast to the socially engaged forms of Buddhism that appeared in the 1960s and which are echoed today in the Occupy Wall Street activism of Wisdom 2.0 protesters like Ream (van Itallie 2011). The impact of this spiritualized

market ideology extends beyond elite attendees at Wisdom 2.0, ensconcing producers, users, and underprivileged stakeholders in commercialized networks of elite entitlement and collective delusion.

4. The Black-Nosed Buddhas of Silicon Valley

As ideas derived from Buddhism permeated tech culture, thought leaders selected approaches consonant with American-style consumerist individualism. This trend was present in Jobs' early experimentation, in which Zen meditation in its Americanized form served as a route to "cathartic euphoria" rather than a catalyst for compassionate service (Brazier 2002, p.162). Jobs claimed to prefer Zen's lack of "religious structure" and its emphasis on "experience, intuition, and self-fulfillment through inner consciousness" (quoted in Robinson 2013, p.86). His approach was consistent with a broader cultural trend toward the sacralization of technology. While he traveled to India and studied Zen meditation in Los Altos (Robinson 2012, p.86), Jobs – according to Timothy Leary – ultimately decided that "Edison did more to influence the human race than Buddha" (quoted in Dery 1997, p.28).

The techno-spiritualism of today's Silicon Valley extends Jobs' early vision. In crafting corporate mindfulness programs, leaders like Chade-Meng Tan select ideas and practices that resonate with the individualist focus of consumer culture, jettisoning those that call into question the structural basis of the digital economy. In fairness, there is little evidence that the Buddha was interested in a program of institutional transformation or structural reform. Accounts in the Pāli Canon indicate that neither he nor his followers challenged powerful elites in the manner of the Hebrew prophets, for example (Loy 2013, p.407). Nevertheless, social-scientific research has afforded a more robust understanding of the structural roots of human suffering, and distinctions such as that between delusion and awareness in canonical Buddhist texts are readily applicable to contemporary debates about the manipulation of consumer attention in mass media. For these reasons, leaders who adapt practices and principles from the Buddhist tradition have an opportunity—if not an ethical obligation—to "develop more freely the social implications of its basic perspective" (Loy 2013, p.411). Market imperatives render such considerations unlikely in the corporate context, however. The result, as Brazier (2002, p.198) suggests, is that today's

spiritual marketplace neglects teachings of “greater scope” in favor of “a teaching of lesser scope” which “has a substantial element of selfishness about it.”

Indeed, beyond the localized issues of gentrification in San Francisco, the irony that Ream and her colleagues aimed to expose at Wisdom 2.0 is the disjuncture between Silicon Valley’s rhetoric of mindfulness and the structural impact of its business practices. This issue is not unique to digital culture. It has long been the case that, as Loy (2013, p.417) argues, “our economic system promotes structural *dukkha* by institutionalizing greed.” Specifically, it favors the production of private goods while neglecting the importance of public goods like education, journalism, and health care, which “do not lend themselves to ‘market discipline’” (McChesney 2013, p.52). The attempt to subject public goods to the logic of the marketplace “is generally disastrous” (2013, p.52) because the mantra of “Grow or Die” (2013, p.47) places primary value on the acquisition of private wealth. The common good is, at best, a secondary consideration.

The fate of artistic and literary works set to enter the public domain is a case in point. The film, record, and tech industries have battled to hold on to the fruits of artistic labor under the protective shield of ever-more-restrictive copyright and intellectual property laws.² Critics raised the issue in a well-traveled New Year’s Day meme under the title, “What *could* have entered the public domain on January 1, 2014?” (Center for the Study of the Public Domain 2014). The answer included Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and Dr. Seuss’s *The Cat in the Hat*. Had copyright terms not been extended through industry pressure and Congressional acquiescence, these works would have been released as “free as the air to common use.” As it stands, they will remain under lock and key until 2053.

Such efforts to keep artistic products out of the public domain, and to funnel profits for their use to a small number of market players, is reminiscent of a well-known Zen story called The Black-Nosed Buddha:

A nun who was searching for enlightenment made a statue of Buddha and covered it with gold leaf. Wherever she went she carried this golden Buddha with her.

Years passed and, still carrying her Buddha, the nun came to live in a small temple in a country where there were many Buddhas, each one with its own particular shrine.

The nun wished to burn incense before her golden Buddha. Not liking the idea of the perfume straying to others, she devised a funnel through which the smoke would ascend only to her statue. This blackened the nose of the golden Buddha, making it especially ugly. (Quoted in Reps and Senzaki 1998, p.64)

Commercial organizations have repeatedly ‘blackened their noses’ through egregious attacks on unwitting violators of copyright law. In the mid-1990s, the songwriting organization ASCAP issued a licensing order forbidding camps like the Girl Scouts from singing “This Land is Our Land” (Bollier 2005, p.14-16). The response was furious, and as one ASCAP official admitted, “We got a big black eye from this” (Walker and Fagan 1996). More recently, Warner Brothers sent cease-and-desist letters to teens who had published creative fiction on Harry Potter fan websites. Fans forced the company to reconsider, causing another black eye—or nose—for the industry (Jenkins 2006, p.186-188). The trend toward tighter copyright control continues nevertheless.

Similar issues plague the era of ‘big data,’ where the collection of personal information forms the backbone of the digital economy. Researchers are beginning to understand the potential public good value of big data in tracking political discourse or predicting disease outbreaks and environmental disasters. Yet these potential benefits are undermined by attempts to privatize consumer data for sale to third party marketing services. Spearheaded by Apple, companies like Facebook and Google have moved toward a “walled garden” approach that locks user data within “tethered” devices and proprietary data clouds (McChesney 2013, p.135-136). Though epitomized by the social media platforms of Web 2.0, this trend began in the 1990s when commercial incentives spurred “the use of patents to create unnecessary and dangerous monopolies rather than as incentives for research” (2013, p.103-104). Symptomatic of the ideological reversal within digital culture, this development troubled innovators like Tim Berners-Lee, who claimed that it would have been “unthinkable” for him to patent the World Wide Web protocols he had developed (quoted in McChesney 2013, p.103). Proprietary platforms have nevertheless become the norm, with the U.S. government acting in global markets “like a private police force for the Internet giants, corporate media, and all businesses

that rely on patents and copyright” (2013, p.162). In the networked era, in other words, the pipe that funnels smoke to the black-nosed Buddha is patented and armed for its own protection (Healey 2014a).

The tendency toward monopoly control in the digital economy leads to an imbalance between negative and positive market ‘externalities’—that is, the “costs and benefits of market transactions that are not born by the buyer or seller” (McChesney 2013, p.50-51). Privatization leads to a neglect of potential research benefits and other public goods, while generating significant negative consequences typically shouldered by socio-economic minorities. The use of public routes by ‘Google buses,’ which transport a mostly white and male workforce, has come to symbolize this issue: the image of a luxurious bus stopping briefly near a crowd of blue-collar commuters represents one of the few points of contact between divergent socio-economic classes. Beyond San Francisco, the abuse of user data in the form of price discrimination, racial and religious profiling, and the targeted marketing of “predatory financial instruments” has raised concerns among civil rights groups and lawmakers in the U.S. (Fung 2014). Marketers target different socio-economic groups as “American Royalty” or “X-tra Needy” (Fung 2013)—labels that can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Such developments are troubling since, as Loy (2013, p.417, emphasis original) notes, in today’s powerful institutions “collective selves often *assume a life of their own*.” As Purser and Milillo’s (2014) critique of Kabat-Zinn’s work on mindfulness suggests, to the extent that commercial organizations actively construct and exploit collective identities while externalizing negative consequences, they fail to fulfill the principle of ‘right mindfulness.’ The latter concept includes a significant emphasis on “social responsibility,” aiming “not merely to enhance the quality of attention or the reduction of stress but to transform the human mind by lessening, and ultimately eliminating, toxic mental states rooted in greed, ill will, and delusion” (Purser and Milillo 2014, p.4-5). Corporations focus mainly on stress reduction and productivity enhancement in their mindfulness programs even as they exacerbate issues of institutional suffering. As reporter Caitlin Kelly (2012) argues, proponents like Bill Duane understand mindfulness as “sort of an organizational WD-40, a necessary lubricant between driven, ambitious employees and Google’s demanding corporate culture.”

Corporate mindfulness programs ensconce employees within “integrity bubbles” where a personal experience of peacefulness belies the disruption that corporate initiatives precipitate in the broader digital economy (Healey 2013a). In this sense they exemplify the Buddhist concept of *avidya* or “not looking,” which Brazier (2002, p.9) describes as “the root of all misery in the world.” From this standpoint, the market principle of risk externalization is deeply problematic since “If we do not look at the consequences of what we do, then we can carry on building our own ideas and chasing our own desires and pleasures, and while we do, we contribute to the oppression” (Brazier 2002, p.9).

These structural dynamics precipitate a similarly problematic ethos of self-concern among users. The aggregation of user data for marketing purposes is premised on the cultivation of users’ fixation on the construction of individual profiles through content production, sharing, and the expression of preferences. More than convenient, marketers frame the resulting personalization of content as revelatory of one’s authentic self. For example, the streaming music app Pandora suggests that its algorithms offer listeners the “magical” experience of encountering “You, in musical form.”

The problematic nature of such static formulations of the self is well-established in contemporary sociological theory (Vannini & Williams 2009), and similar approaches within Buddhist philosophy extend these sociological critiques. As Loy (2013, p.419) argues, institutional *dukkha* reflects and reinforces “the personal *dukkha* built into the delusions of consumerism” (Loy 2013, p.419)—chiefly the delusion that individuals possess a “separate self” that can easily be quantified and categorized (p.415). The concept of *anattā* or ‘not-self’ suggests precisely the opposite: namely that the ordinary perception of one’s ‘self,’ while psychologically and socially useful, is ultimately illusory (Loy 2013, p.415). Furthermore, because of its illusory nature “the sense of self is usually haunted by a sense of *lack*: the feeling that something is wrong with me, that something is missing or not quite right about my life” (Loy 2013, p.415, emphasis original).

The purpose of mindfulness training is not to “eliminate or annihilate the self,” but instead to “reveal that it never existed in the first place”—a realization that, in the context of appropriate practice, can be psychologically “liberating” (Purser 2012, p.19). Rather than assisting in the process of such realization, however, “a consumerist economy *exploits* our sense

of lack, and often aggravates it, rather than helping us resolve the root problem. The system generates profits by perpetuating our discontent in a way that leaves us always wanting more” (Loy 2013, p.416, emphasis original).

By tying the construction of personal identity directly to the market dynamics of the advertising industry, social media is especially complicit in this process. While the “realization of selflessness” does not cause the psychological self to disappear entirely, proper practice ensures that as insight into the nature of self is developed “the person is no longer fixed or overinvested in self-images, habitual reactions, or a sense of metaphysical substantiality” (Purser 2012, p.19). Yet the fixation on self-image is precisely the goal of commercial social media platforms. In fact, research suggests that users who score high in measures of narcissism tend to use Twitter and Facebook as “a technologically enhanced mirror, reflecting a pre-occupation with one’s own image, others’ reactions to this image, and a desire to update the image as frequently as possible” (Panek, Nardis, and Konrath 2013, p.2010). While most users may not qualify as narcissistic, the architecture of such platforms nevertheless invites all users to engage in what Purser (2012, p.21) calls “reality projects,” which consist of the many “symbolic ways we try to make ourselves real in the world.” Platforms encourage the commodification of these practices by offering rewards for personal association with celebrities and brands. By offering features like Facebook’s “Promoted Posts,” which allows users to purchase prominence on their friends’ News Feeds, they further the trend toward self-branding in our personal and professional lives. In these ways, the reification of social identity categories that occurs at the behind-the-scenes institutional level is mirrored at the personal level by users’ construction of branded self-images.

Purser (2012, p.21) concludes that “all attempts at objectification of the self are ultimately doomed to failure” since reality projects “are compulsive substitutes and displacements that can never fulfill our desires.” This insight may explain why increased use of platforms like Facebook is correlated with a decline in subjective well-being (Kross, Verduyn, Demiralp, Park, Lee, Lin, et al. 2013, p.4). As Purser (2012, p.21) argues, while corporate capitalism and mass consumerism may “promise to resolve our sense of lack,” ultimately “such solutions amount to institutionalized forms of greed, ill will and delusion.” In this sense users, as much as software engineers and corporate executives, may suffer the ill-effects of myopic self-

concern. As commercialized digital media permeates more aspects of their daily lives, users too may unwittingly become ‘black-nosed Buddhas’ within an ever-expanding diaspora of Silicon Valley.

5. Conclusion: ‘Occupying’ Mindfulness

The form of mindfulness practice on offer at Wisdom 2.0 succeeds primarily in generating ‘integrity bubbles’ for technology elites even as their organizations produce platforms and services that undermine the cultivation of mindfulness among individual users and the general public. Commercial imperatives select for consumer-friendly understandings of mindfulness that provide stress-reduction benefits without addressing the structural causes of suffering. It is not surprising, then, that activists like Ream are deeply involved in the global Occupy movement, which aims to raise awareness about structural injustice and to imagine alternative political-economic systems. While embracing individual practices like meditation, yoga, and prayer, Occupy activists aim to move beyond individual stress-reduction by cultivating collective awareness of injustice within the body politic as a whole.

In his essay “Occupy Mindfulness”, David Forbes (2012), a participant at ACMHE and ISCS, argues that the corporate appropriation of Buddhist mindfulness techniques is an important target for Occupy activism, since it represents a further encroachment of commercial interests into the public sphere. Moreover, he directly links mindfulness and anti-corporate activism:

Mindfulness is a way to occupy yourself, to fully inhabit your body and mind with presence and awareness and not over-identify with one's fleeting thoughts and unmindfully act on them; in this sense it mirrors the occupy movement itself by committing to a stand of non-participation.

In this sense, the Occupy movement represents a demand for greater integrity in public discourses about mindfulness, which are frequently dominated by commercial institutions and narrowly-focused research programs. It suggests an expansive definition of mindfulness that

includes not only the ability for individuals to reflect on their own thought processes but a collective willingness to question prevailing political-economic ideologies.

Such an expansive definition is latent but underdeveloped within Contemplative Studies. Arthur Zajonc, Director of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, argues that the goal of mindfulness meditation is to create an orientation to the world “that is not imprisoned or distorted by mental habits or emotional desires. When free of these, we are opened to a richer exploration to reality that presents to us new insights into self and world” (quoted in Bush 2011, p.184). Contemplative Media Studies aims to clarify the collective implications of this definition by articulating not only the characteristics of the mindful individual but those of a mindful culture and—more specifically—a mindful political economy of mass media.

Some Contemplative Studies research has begun to carve this path. In applying contemplative concepts to the field of education, Robert Thurman demonstrates how teachers and administrators can bring greater integrity to their institutions’ pedagogical commitments. Beyond adding “a desirable frill” to course offerings, universities’ incorporation of contemplative principles fulfills “their duty to provide a liberal, that is, a liberating and empowering, education” (quoted in Bush 2011, p.186). Similarly, Daniel Barbezat, in his application of contemplative principles to economics, argues that mindfulness can help citizens understand their long-term self-interest so as to avoid the mistaken assumptions that led to the recent economic collapse (described in Bush 2011, p.195).

Highlighting such systemic benefits of contemplative inquiry, I have offered the term *civic mindfulness* to describe a set of “principles and practices aimed at addressing stress in the body politic, including abuses of power and breaches of the public trust” (Healey 2013a). From a media studies perspective, the revitalization of journalism as an institution and professional practice is an essential ingredient in cultivating civic mindfulness. It is indispensable in addressing the economic pitfalls that Barbezat describes, since its function is to hold powerful interests accountable; to expose propaganda; to address all citizens’ concerns; and to monitor long-term issues systematically (McChesney 2013, p.83). In doing so it fulfills basic democratic principle of government by consent. Yet in order to fulfill these goals journalism must be understood, like education, not as a market commodity but as a public good (McChesney 2013, p.194). In turn, this means that civic mindfulness requires government regulation and

intervention to support public-interest journalism as a non-commercial enterprise. Through acquiescence to the pressures of the advertising industry, the commercialism of today's digital economy undermines the public interest benefits of journalism (McChesney 2013, p.190). In fact, the Internet itself has "strong attributes of a public good" (McChesney 2013, p.52), but the 'catechism' of market ideology—which corporate mindfulness advocates readily embrace—leads to deregulatory policies that undermine that potential.

The increase of public and academic interest in mindfulness has yielded new opportunities for enhancing both personal and civic well-being. The emerging field of Contemplative Studies is charged with task of understanding and applying contemplative principles and practices from a range of religious traditions. This is an ethically challenging task, since it requires avoiding theological entanglements while nevertheless preserving the integrity of practice. While most research in this area has adopted contemplative principles in a limited fashion focused on individual practice, I suggest that concern for the integrity of practice requires an application of such principles at the institutional level as well. Contemplative Media Studies, by integrating critical media scholarship with complementary ideas from Buddhism and other traditions, extends the path toward this end.

My current research examines alternate technical and regulatory frameworks for the emerging digital economy, including non-commercial social media platforms; user privacy and online identity initiatives; and public-interest media reforms. To the extent that such strategies embrace a holistic commitment to both personal and civic mindfulness, the emerging digital economy may yet fulfil what Loy (2013, p. 420) describes as the primary goal of every economic system—namely "to promote widespread and sustainable human flourishing." Provided that discourse about mindfulness is not 'captured' by market imperatives—either in academic or corporate contexts—an era of mindful politics and mindful technology may yet arise.

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¹ The term 'great reversal' refers to Marsden's (1980) description of American evangelicals' turn away from social concerns in the late nineteenth century.

² An earlier version of this discussion of copyright appears in *Nomos Journal* (Healey, 2014a).