

Consumerism & the Limits to Imagination

Featuring Justin Lewis

[Transcript]

An Endless Proliferation of Goods

Justin Lewis: Today, I'm going to talk about our dominant economic, social, cultural, political system: consumer capitalism.

At the heart of the success of this model lie two linked ideas. The first is an image of "the good life" based upon the accumulation of consumer goods, and the second is the idea of perpetual and infinite economic growth. What I want to argue today is that both those ideas are beginning to unravel, and that there are a new set of conditions in the 21st Century, which means that consumer capitalism may be past its sell-by date.

The system's genius for proliferation, for turning nature into dazzling aisles of consumer goods. It's based on the idea that its benefits are infinite, that they will go on forever. That comes crashing up against various ideas that are finite.

Video Clip: The unprecedented volume of goods of all kinds gobbled up by an insatiable tide of buyers was the work of the consumer, the dominant economic personality of our time.

Justin Lewis: Now, at the heart of consumer capitalism is an idea, which really I think is based on a fundamental limit of imagination. This is a system that can never imagine a world in which we have enough stuff.

There will never be a point when we say, "Actually, we've got enough stuff. Let's think about what we might do with that stuff. Or let's think about doing something else." It can never imagine that moment. And from that point of view, the system itself has, at its heart, a fundamental limit of imagination. It's not an imaginative system. It's very, very closed.

Now economically, there are two major problems with that vision. The first we could call the problem of diminishing returns. Now, the law of diminishing returns in economics usually applies to production, but there's also a sense in which the law of diminishing returns applies to consumption. In other words, the value of every new object that we acquire will diminish depending on how many objects we already have. It will plateau as we accumulate more and more objects. Now, the system doesn't really get that. The system assumes that the value of every new object that we acquire is equal to the one that preceded it. So within this system is a basic flaw that does not appreciate the law of diminishing returns in consumption.

To get a sense of how striking that is you have to look back. An advertiser back in the 1920s plaintively complained about the proliferation of goods that he saw in the 1920s. He actually said that most products were so heavily advertised that they were "scratching gravel from the bottom of consumer demand. The grocer and the chemist look despairingly at their crowded shelves when asked to find places for another breakfast food or a new toothpaste." Now, of course, what happened is they did find space. The shops got much bigger, the shelves got more extensive, and we moved forward to the 1950s when there were far more things. And by the 1950s, we really do begin to enter consumer culture as we now know it.

Video Clip: A daily battle is being waged in supermarkets all over this country – a battle for the customer's dollar.

Justin Lewis: And you get a series of commentators in the 1950s that begin now to see that there's this paradigm shift, that we are now in a world in which we've become fixated with the idea of accumulating more things. We've become fixated with the idea that we must have more economic growth. We must have more stuff to be happy.

But a more profound limit, I think, is the clash between time and money.

The Decline of Leisure

Justin Lewis: From about 1900 to about 1950, our twin desires are for more things and for more time in which to enjoy those things.

Video Clip: There's a fresh look to fun in America today. Stylists have added new zest to recreation by bringing an exciting look to the large variety of things which make leisure hours more pleasurable.

Justin Lewis: And while many people mid-century, many thinkers, were looking ahead to the year 2000 as a period where we would probably be working around four hours a day...

News Clip: Technology is opening a new world of leisure time. One government report projects that, by the year 2000, we may have a 30-hour work week and a month-long vacation as the rule.

Justin Lewis: That didn't happen. We got stuck on around a 40-hour week.

So the first half of the 20th century, you see an increase in our leisure time of about 15 to 20 hours. And that has a certain logic to it. If we have more stuff, it's good to have more time to buy and enjoy the stuff. In the second half of the century, that changes. We still acquire more stuff, but the time we have to buy that stuff and to consume it starts to remain static. So we get more and more stuff, but the time we have available to deal with it remains the same.

Now, by 1970, writers like Staffan Linder wrote about the problems of leisure at a time of super-abundance, and he wrote a book called "The Harried Leisure Class," in which he talked about the way that we have so many things thrust at us that leisure itself has become less leisurely because we've got to consume so many things at any one time.

Now, that continued, so even though 1970 was in many ways an age of plenty. We didn't lack for things to enjoy.

TV Commercial: Frozen vegetables, frozen meat entrees, frozen concentrated juices, ice cream... If it's frozen, you can save plenty.

Justin Lewis: But the proportion of goods on the supermarkets shelves since 1975 has gone up by five times since then. There are five times as many products on our supermarket shelves as there were back in 1975. And we've really reached a point now where this proliferation of commodities has become difficult to negotiate.

Let me give you one example. We went into my local supermarket the other month, and we counted how many different varieties of shampoo you could buy in that supermarket. And we found 188 different types of shampoo. Now, think about that for a moment. Think about how you deal with that level of choice. If you were going to try to make a rational decision about which shampoo to buy, it would be a major research project. You would probably have to apply for a grant to carry it out. You would have to employ a legion of research assistants to work for you – all of whom have to analyze the chemical construction of every shampoo bottle, how it was suited to your own particular hair, type, and color, and then carry out various forms of analysis about which shampoo was best for you out of the 188. By the time you'd finished, of course, the number would no longer be 188, it would probably be larger, so you'd have to carry on and on and on. That's not what we're going to do.

And here lies a troubling fact for consumer capitalism. Because at the heart of consumer capitalism, the figure that gives it its central logic is somebody called the "rational consumer." The rational consumer makes rational decisions about the best product for the best price. That keeps the whole system ticking over and, surprise, its central logic. But as the rational consumer says, "Look, I can't make a rational decision here. There are just too many of them. I'll have to behave differently." In fact, the rational consumer, if they are rational, will make the rational decision that there's not enough time to be a rational consumer. So in the 21st century, we have the catch-22 that the rational consumer makes the rational decision to give up being a rational consumer. It's simply not possible any longer.

Economic Growth & Happiness

Justin Lewis: The second problem with consumer capitalism I think follows very much from the first, and that has to do with its social aspects.

TV Commercial [Song]: Traveling along, there's a song that we're singing. Come on, get happy.

Justin Lewis: Consumer capitalism claims, its central claim, is that we will all be happier and healthier if we consume more.

TV Commercial [Song]: Forget your troubles. Come on, get happy. You better chase all your cares away. Shout hallelujah. Come on, get happy. Get ready for the judgment day.

Justin Lewis: That claim now reverberates around the echo-chamber of advertising with an increasingly hollow ring.

TV Commercial: Spread the happy.

Justin Lewis: There has been a burgeoning in the last two decades of what we might call "quality of life" research – research that looks at the things that make up our quality of life. Looking at how healthy we are physically, how healthy we are psychologically. Looking at how our lives might be free from crime. It also looks at some softer measurements like the way we report our state of happiness, our state of well-being, how meaningful our lives are.

All of that research has begun to show something quite striking: That, up to a certain point, increases in GDP growth have a positive effect on our well-being and quality of life. But past a certain point, the relationship between GDP growth and quality of life begins to disintegrate and disappears all together. So here in the U.S., we have come to a point now where there is no connection at all between GDP growth and quality of life. Now, that is a pretty striking finding, and it's repeated in study after study after study.

Somebody who's researched this in Britain called Richard Layard puts it like this. He says, "People in the West have got no happier in the last 50 years. They have become much richer, but they are no happier. This shocking fact should be the starting point for much of our social science." Well, I'd go further than that and say this fact should be the starting point for our politics. Because if that's true, why are all of our politicians obsessed, particularly now, with creating more economic growth?

Political Speech [President Barack Obama]: And that's why on Tuesday I laid out some new steps that we can take right now to speed up economic growth.

Political Speech [Hillary Clinton]: We need to unlock a vital source of growth that can power our economies in the decades to come.

Political Speech [Chris Christie]: The most important thing that you can do as a governor for your economy is to try to institute pro-growth policies that grow the pie.

Political Speech [John Cornyn]: The best way to help Americans and America is to increase economic growth.

Justin Lewis: Why? What's it for? What's the point of it? What does it give us? What does it deliver? It's not so clear.

Research also shows in fact that excessive materialism actually has a negative impact on our well-being. So various people – Tim Kasser, Juliet Schor, Avner Offer – have researched this and found that, in fact, an excessive involvement in the world of consumption actually makes us more miserable. And the reason for that is because it pushes us away from those things that often do make us happy or fulfilled and content, and that's the social aspects of life. And it's those relationships that often supply us with meaning and fulfillment, rather than the less fulfilling retail therapy of the shopping mall. If we're obsessed with simply acquiring objects, we're doing less of that.

Consumer Capitalism & the Environment

Justin Lewis: The third problem with consumer capitalism in the 21st century is perhaps the best known. And I think in some ways its both the most serious but also the most solvable of the three problems – and that's the environmental problems that result from consumer capitalism. I mean, there's a basic problem here that most of us are aware of that a system demanding infinite growth in a world that is finite is inevitably going to come up against problems at some point.

The word that economists use is the word “externalities.” This is a bit like when people in the military talk about “collateral damage.” It's an innocent sounding phrase that doesn't sound like it could be that bad, but actually it conceals a great deal of damage.

One of the externalities of consumer capitalism is that we produce vast amounts of waste. We produce waste when we make things. We produce waste when we transport things. We produce waste when we consume things and throw them away. The World Bank estimates that we currently produce 1.3 billion tons of municipal waste every year. And they predict that will rise to 2.2 billion tons by 2025. And the annual cost of dealing with all that waste is considerable. It's about \$205 billion a year.

Now, that cost is not borne by the people who produce it. They are subsidized. The whole system of consumer capitalism has a huge in-built subsidy, which is it produces vast amounts of waste but the people who pay to deal with that waste are the public. And for poorer cities and towns, that's a huge drain on their resources. The World Bank estimates that for certain poorer cities in the world, roughly 20-50% of their budgets just go on disposing of all that stuff, all that waste. Now, that means they're not able to spend money on things that we'd like them to spend money on, things like health or education, because it's all spent, if you like, subsidizing just one externality of consumer capitalism. So it comes at a very high price.

But the mother of all externalities, and I'm borrowing here from the economist Nicholas Stern, is climate change – the fact that consumer capitalism relies for its production on generating fossil fuels that go into the atmosphere and create a kind of seal around the

atmosphere, which means that the planet gets warmer, and that then affects the ecosystems in which we live.

Now, we've known about climate change for a long time. Over 100 years, people have been working on climate change. But it started to get particularly critical in the 1980s, when more and more researchers from across a whole range of fields to do with climate science were talking about the critical levels that we might reach in the next few decades because they saw that greenhouse gasses were being produced at an ever-increasing rate.

Many people from across the political spectrum were concerned about this. Margaret Thatcher, not somebody that we associate as being a great environmentalist, she made a speech about the worrying trend of climate change and what we should do about it.

Political Speech [Margaret Thatcher]: Of all the challenges faced by the world community those four years, one has grown clearer than any other in both urgency and importance. I refer to the threat to our global environment.

Justin Lewis: That led to the United Nations bringing the world's best experts across the various fields of climate science together to produce the most definitive and comprehensive report they could on climate change. About what the dangers were, what might happen, what we might do about it. And they produced their first fairly definitive report in 1990, well over 20 years ago now. That report said that it was very likely that if we carried on going the way we were going, there would be various climate changes over the next few decades that could have significant and, if unchecked, catastrophic impacts for life on earth. Ecosystems will become unstable and may be destroyed, making life uninhabitable for hundreds of millions of people. So the stakes were very high. As many of you will know they produced a succession of reports since then. The science stacks up and up and up.

And what have we done about that? Well, what we've done is make the problem worse. Since 1990, the level of greenhouse gas emissions produced globally has not stabilized, it has increased by 40%.

Now why aren't we doing anything about it? We're pretty risk-averse, normally. Ulrich Beck, the sociologist, said that we live in a risk society now where we worry about all kinds of things that will never happen. We worry about our children being abducted by strangers. The chances of that happening are absolutely miniscule. We worry about diseases that might be imported by various animals in various ways, all kinds of things that will probably never happen. And yet when faced with huge amounts of evidence of something that will have devastating consequences, we're pretty relaxed.

News Clip:

- You're not worried about climate change?
- Absolutely not.
- Why not?
- Because it's exaggerated. It's hysterical.

Justin Lewis: "Yeah whatever. So it gets a bit warmer, if we're in a cold part of the world that'll be quite nice. "

News Clip:

- I mean really, in your lifetime it's maybe going to be 5 degrees warmer. 5 degrees is wonderful.

- It's true, it's true. There's better plants. You can go to the beach at earlier times. People live longer under warmer climates. Just ask any dead ice age guy.

Justin Lewis: Unfortunately, it is rather more serious. As the NASA climate scientist James Hansen and colleagues put it, "Continued growth of greenhouse gas emissions for just another decade practically eliminates the possibility of near-term return of atmospheric composition beneath the tipping level for catastrophic effects."

Now this is a manifestly solvable problem. We know where the problem is, we know how to fix it. We could fix it tomorrow if we wanted. But we don't. And the reason why we don't is because consumer capitalism makes it very difficult for us to do that, for two reasons. One, consumer capitalism is not very good at thinking in the medium or the long-term.

The other problem with consumer capitalism here is that one of the solutions to climate change is something it simply cannot comprehend. One of the solutions is that we start to consume less. And that's something that consumer capitalism just says, "Hang on, what? Doesn't compute, don't understand. That's not something that we can do. That's just simply not possible within these systems." So climate change, from that point-of-view, is a function of living in a finite world, but it's beyond the philosophical imagination of a system premised on infinite growth.

So, just to sum up the problems, consumer capitalism has become economically incoherent. It's no longer capable of making us healthier or happier, and it risks jeopardizing the ecosystems on which we depend.

The Perils of Planned Obsolescence

Justin Lewis: So what's the problem here? Why don't we start to think about other models? Well the reason, I think, has to do with our media and communications industries, and I want to mention just three of them today. And the first of them has to do with the way in which our media and communications industries are structured around certain kinds of commercial imperatives and certain kinds of business models. This is an industry that's very important economically; it's about seven percent of global economic activity. That's a pretty big chunk for a sector, and that's growing.

It's growing at a faster rate than most other sectors. But much more important than that, this is a sector that dominates our waking hours. This is a sector like no other. This is a sector that has a command over our attention that no other sector gets close to. People in

the United States spend around 68 hours a week consuming media. That's a long time. That's more time than we're likely to spend doing the other two things that dominate our lives, which is working or sleeping.

The way the industry operates therefore is very important because it's likely to have a greater impact on the way we think than other industries are.

And here I want to take a side step to mention something I call the "Bubka Principle." Some of you will remember a fantastic Ukrainian pole-vaulter called Sergey Bubka. He was an extraordinary athlete; he broke the world pole vault record 35 times. Now that's quite remarkable, but it's a little less remarkable when you understand why he broke it 35 times. He broke it a tiny little bit at a time, and he did that because every time he attended an athletics meet, he got a big payout for breaking a world record. So he quickly realized that he wasn't going to fly over the bar and break the world record by 10 centimeters, or whatever it was. He was going to break it one centimeter at a time. And you often actually saw him, I remember seeing him flying over the bar by you know, this much, and thinking, "Come on, do it again. You can get higher." But he wouldn't because he'd lose his next payout.

Now, the way our media and telecommunications industries operate is a bit like that. There could be major breakthroughs that could take us a great leap forward but it's not in their interest to do that. It's in their interests to do things in a way that maximizes their business opportunity. And as a result, they are in the vanguard of something that we call "planned or built-in obsolescence." The idea that to be as profitable as possible means producing something that will become useless as quickly as possible. And the quicker you can do that, the more this thing becomes obsolete quickly, the more money you will make because you can keep on selling it to us over and over again.

It's a business model that this industry above all others has become fantastically skilled at. It has a genius for built-in obsolescence. So companies like Apple, that have a real flair for this thing, now operate on the principle that everything that Apple produces, they will be working to make sure that it needs to be replaced in a period of 12 to 18 months so that you'll buy the next thing and keep on buying the next thing. As Jonathan Stern put it, this is an industry in which obsolescence is not only planned, but forced and engineered and there are many, many examples of that.

TV Commercial:

- This is the new iPhone 6.
- And this is the new iPhone 6+.
- They're the biggest iPhones ever made.
- They're huge.

Justin Lewis: Let me just think about many of the changes that we've seen in technology. So for example, the change when we moved from vinyl to CD. We moved from vinyl to CD not because people said, "We want CDs. They're better than vinyl." That's not why it happened. It happened because the industry realized there was money to be made in

switching the technology on which people listened to music. One, you could sell people new stuff, so you could sell them CD players. Two, you could sell them the music they already had all over again. It's a very nice business model.

Remarkably, we now see CDs becoming obsolete and vinyl making a come back. In fact, sales of vinyl have gone up year on year over the last few years and in fact the head of the recording music group at Water Music Group, suggested that, and I quote, "Vinyl will definitely outlast CDs because of the resonance, the sound."

Now this from an industry that said, "Forget about vinyl. It's all about CDs." Now what that tells you is that it's not really about progress, it's about change. It's about changing as often as possible and it doesn't really matter whether the change is an improvement or not. All that really matters is that you make the change, and you can see that in every place you look.

Film Clip: Hello Ms. LaVerne? Ms. Lola LaVerne? [Background 'ooing']

Justin Lewis: Phones: I remember when phones, the style of a phone, was emblematic of a whole decade. So you know, you'd see a movie from the 1960's and there'd be a phone in it and you'd think, "Yup, that's a 1960's phone. That phone speaks to the style of the 1960's." The average life of a phone now is 12 to 18 months, and the vast majority of the phones that we throw away are in perfect working order when we get rid of them. So we've gone from a period of replacement that was around a decade to one that's around 12 to 18 months.

Computers: computers are based on a principle of a kind of symbiotic relationship between software and hardware which requires us to upgrade them, and usually upgrading one requires you to upgrade the other, so you have to buy new computers for the software and new software for the computers and so on and so on. Now, early on, the upgrades really were an upgrade -- "Yeah this is definitely better than what I had before." But I suspect most of you, the last time you experienced an upgrade didn't feel that.

Just one other example: broadcasting. You look at television and broadcasting generally. What we watch on television often has a remarkable longevity. I mean, shows last a long time often. There are shows on television in the U.S. that have been around for 40 years. Other shows that maybe lasted 10 continue to exist in various other forms and so they also carry on. The show "Friends" for example, the show "Friends" is one of my daughters favorite programs. Now, the first episode of "Friends" was broadcasted before she was born, but she and her friends enjoy the show because it continues to exist.

So the same content is flowing around the system, but the objects on which we watch that content has changed many, many times. So our TVs changed their shape one way, and then they changed their shape another way – so they became wider. Then the way we got the signal changed and it changed again. Now we can get 3D TV, so it will change yet again. So the same content but over and over again we're replacing the object on which we're watching it.

Now all this has a huge environmental cost. Just take one device: video game consoles. Just one electronic device. In the United States, video game consoles collectively consume electricity at the same rate as the entire city of San Diego. That's the 9th largest city in the U.S. One device. And actually, that's not the real problem here. The amount of electricity they consume when we're running them is not the main environmental problem because actually these devices consume four times as much resource in their production as they do in their use. So the real problem here is not the lack of energy efficiency when we use them, it's the fact that we keep replacing them. And the more often we do it, the worse it becomes.

The average computer and monitor requires something like 530 pounds of fossil fuels to produce it, 50 pounds of chemicals, and 3,300 pounds of water. That's roughly the same resources you need to produce an SUV. And if you have a system that says, "Computers will last you three, five years if you're lucky," then you are on a very damaging environmental course. The main problem here, I think, is an ideological one. Consumer capitalism has encouraged us to think that human progress is all about the replacement of commodities. If we're not chucking the old thing away and buying something new as often as possible, then we're not progressing.

News Clip:

- People are finally able to get their hands on the new iPhone 5, and some folks even out on the street for that opportunity.
- 3, 2, 1 [cheering!]
- Perhaps only NASA can rival Apple for launch anticipation.
- You couldn't wait another day?
- Nah I can't do it, I need it on the first day.
- Behold the Apple iPhone 5.
- Best moment of my life. I'm so excited. I love this place, I love these people, I love the shop, I love Apple, I love Steve Jobs.

Justin Lewis: That's how we think about. We don't think about, "Well progress is what we do with the objects. You know, progress is if the objects make our lives more fulfilling, make us smarter, mean that we know more."

Advertising & the Limits to Imagination

Justin Lewis: The second problem is to do with our dominant cultural industry, advertising industry. It's the greatest concentration of creative talent and energy that we have. The Disney Corporation used the term, "imagineer". They're people who sculpt and construct imaginative landscapes for the Disney Corporation. We have created a culture in which our principle imagineers are in the advertising industry; and it's grown hugely over the last 100, especially the last 50 years.

Now the irony of course is that the more stuff we have, the more we need it. So advertising in the developed world has to work harder and harder the more we have, so it has grown at a faster and faster rate. Global advertising spending grew from \$7.5 billion in 1950 to \$72 billion by the end of the 1970's. By the end of 2011, we were spending half a trillion dollars a year, most of it in the wealthy developed world on advertising.

That has produced what the anthropologist Colin Campbell calls the "Age of Insatiability." An age that anthropologically is quite distinct. And he says that this is remarkable. That, as he puts it, "rarely can an inhabitant of one society, no matter how privileged or wealthy, declare that there is nothing new that they want. That this should be so is a matter of wonder."

We want more things but we don't even know what it is that we want. We just know that we want more, and somebody comes along and tells us what that thing is and then we say, "Yeah, yeah, yeah I want that." So it's a permanent state of wanting that's kind of unfocused. We have chosen to make our dominant cultural industry the industry that produces precisely that state of wanting. And it's everywhere. It has transformed every cultural industry that we can think of.

Take the Internet. This is this fantastic public space, where all this information can be exchanged. But in the space of a very short time, the Internet has become mainly, economically, a way of delivering audiences to advertisers in increasingly sophisticated ways. And any of you who know the way that things like Facebook work will know how sophisticated that has become. But that's mainly what it's about, that's mainly where it's funded from. It's not funded by public money; it's funded by advertising.

Television: television in some countries began as a medium that had no advertising at all. In my own country, in Britain, when television began, there was no advertising on it. Now there has been a proliferation of channels and most of them have more advertising on than they have ever had. There's more advertising on American television than there has ever been at any point in the history of American broadcasting. Recent surveys suggest that 41 percent of viewing time is taken up by advertising on American television. The dominant genre on American television is not sitcom, it's not reality TV, it's not sport -- it's advertising by a mile.

Film: the film industry, I mean films used to be ad free. Now, there's not a film that comes out of Hollywood that doesn't have a slew of product placement deals or that it isn't itself a vehicle for selling products -- witness every Disney film made.

The pop music industry: the pop music industry used to have a very clear dividing line between advertising and itself. It said, "Look, there's something too authentic about pop music to just reduce it to selling a product." And so you had people whose job it was to write music for advertisers, we called them 'jingles.' Nobody talks about 'jingles' anymore because the two industries have become combined in such a way that they have now a symbiotic relationship.

TV Commercial Make a deal with me kid; you can have the car and everything that goes along with it.

Justin Lewis: So the industry benefits from the emotional resonance provided by music, and the music artists benefit from the exposure they get on the ads.

TV Commercial: Do I buy Country Life butter because it's British?

Justin Lewis: We now have things that those of us at a certain age would never have dreamed of where non-conformist punk rockers like Johnny Rotten and Iggy Pop front up commercials for butter and car insurance. That once would have been unimaginable; it's now pretty normal. Indeed, the very idea of the nonconformity that they express is something that they're selling. They want to attach that to the object. It's colonized every cultural form that we can think of.

Now individually, all those ads are pretty innocent. Collectively they are deeply political. If you think about the two big issues of our age, which are climate change and the global terms of trade, advertising has a pretty clear position on both. You know, don't worry. Everything is fine. You don't have to worry about how this was produced. Not relevant, really not relevant. Nothing to do with you. Just enjoy the moment of consumption. And anyway, production is this happy group of people that you might see. Deeply political discourse but we don't recognize it as such.

Now all that cultural activity makes it very hard for us to think about other ways of progressing because we are told over and over again that progress, that happiness, that solutions to every problem lies in one place alone and that is through the consumption of objects. So it's very hard to imagine other ways of doing things.

Disposable News

Justin Lewis: The third is what I call "disposable news." If you look at the growth of news over the last several hundred years, there are two competing notions. One of them is a very democratic notion, that news is all about democracy, all about making us well informed. It's all about challenging conventional wisdom.

Newsreel Clip: The success of a newspaper depends on many things, integrity, desk play, honesty, service in the cause of good government, skilled craftsmen, reporters and editors devoted to their calling.

Justin Lewis: The other is a very different idea, that in order to make news profitable, you've got to make it short-lived. And so you get this sort of ultimate expression of built-in obsolescence, which is the newspaper. Here is an object that becomes obsolescent within a day. I just read it, I'll throw it out, get the next one tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. And the very phrase "yesterday's news" implies that if it happened yesterday then it's of no relevance to anything. Now that's a very effective

business model and it created the idea in our heads that the meaning of news was all to do with it being up to date, to do with it being current.

News Clip: This is CNN Breaking News.

Justin Lewis: An idea that has reached its apotheosis in the 24-hour news channels, where it's all about the latest, the current.

News Clip:

- Happening Now starts right now.

- And right now, breaking developments and brand new stories at this hour.

Justin Lewis: Its current-cy, if you like, is its currency. I mean, news says that it embraces the new. Actually, it only embraces the new in a very superficial sense. It embraces the new in the idea that it happened recently. It doesn't embrace new ideas.

Now the first of those two notions, the idea that news is all about democracy, about questioning conventional wisdom, would imply that news is a space where we can talk about the things that I've been talking about today. The second of those ideas makes it much more difficult to talk about that because in many ways, it's a model of news that becomes the embodiment of a kind of business model of built-in obsolescence, so it's not likely to question it.

We did a study, where we looked at how newspapers were covering the issue of economic growth and one of the things that I've tried to do today is to talk about how controversial in many ways economic growth should be. How in many ways there are all sorts of aspects to economic growth that are troubling, that means it should be a subject to debate.

In 95% of occasions, economic growth was represented as un-objective good. So it wasn't neutral coverage that just said, "Well here's economic growth and here's some facts about it." it was coverage that said, "Economic growth is a good thing. We need more of it. If we don't have more of it, then that's bad. Doesn't matter what form it takes, we just want more of it." So consumption is good. It doesn't matter even if it's based on debt. We want more of it. That's a good thing. So our news media, which perhaps could be the space in which we're debating these things is actually a space in which we're replicating the same ideas.

The Need for Imaginative Space

Justin Lewis: So what I want to suggest is that we need to do if we're going to think about other forms of progress is to create more imaginative space. We need to change the way governments operate. Currently, governments intervene to support consumer capitalism, to sustain it and to limit its externalities based on a model of built-in obsolescence.

We could do something very different. We could say to companies, "Actually, you've got to pay for the cost of the disposal of the things you produce." We could even go further and

say, “We’re not going to subsidize your waste disposal. We're going to subsidize a different group of people. We're going to subsidize those people whose job it is to fix things.” Remember them? You know that if you subsidize that industry and you made the cost of production the true cost of production, then maybe you would get a different way of producing things that focuses less on their temporal nature and more on the need for them to endure.

A second thing we need to do is to treat advertising as political. Governments on the whole, over the last 20 years or so, have created more and more space for advertising. They need to think about creating less space for advertising but also to think about creating media that might begin to offer other points of view.

And finally, I think we need what you might call a “slow news” movement. You know, we had a slow food movement that was a kind of rebellion against mass produced fast food that really wasn't very good for you. We need a movement that's a rebellion against mass produced fast news that really doesn't tell you very much. Once we start to do those things, then maybe we can imagine a world in which maybe we still have consumer capitalism but we don't afford it quite the pride of place that it has now and maybe we can think in the 21st century about other kinds of progress.

[END]