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Current TV: Fast but Treacherous

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By [Niall McKay](#)   Also by this reporter

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Al Gore's new cable network, Current TV, is a media smorgasbord of quick, slick and sometimes very interesting short-form video segments targeted at the iPod generation. But it often leaves you feeling cheated out of the main course after a tasty appetizer.

The segments, nauseatingly called pods, run between two and five minutes and comprise a [mix-and-match](#) of short films, MTV-type snippets and video blogs. Some of the pods are refreshingly authentic and make the youth-oriented programming on MTV and VH1 look vacuous. Others, however, are smug, unsubstantial and even boorish at times, and seem to finish just at the point where they get interesting.

The short format is partly to blame, but one also senses inexperience and lack of judgment on the part of the producers and editors.

Adrian Baschuk's and Jaron Gilinsky's news piece [Last Hours of Neve D.Synagogue](#), for example, is a fascinating story about the emotional trauma that the Israeli troops underwent when removing the Jewish settlers from Gaza. But while it shows footage, such as Israeli soldiers crying, rarely seen on any network, it really could have let the characters tell their own stories rather than smothering them with a heavy-handed voiceover.

Entertainment segments also vary in quality. Josh Faure Brac's Super News is an animated series in which Karl Rove literally has a whipping boy (named "the Press") and takes media advice from Michael Jackson, O.J. Simpson and Robert Blake. It's funny and edgy. On the other hand, Michael Ballard's and David McQueen's [Knight of the Highway](#), a mockumentary about a pizza delivery boy, was a dreadful yawn, complete with bad fart jokes.

Current also suffers from the problem that seems to plague every other youth network: The line between content and commercial is often fuzzy. A segment in which Gambian supermodel [Fatma D'Abo](#) talks about how her bare ass ended up as a commercial for Joe's Jeans is just one example.

The only elements that work consistently well on the network are the information tidbits provided by Google, such as the top 10 news items searched, or survey data like the value of the global cosmetics market.

That said, Current TV does an excellent job of defining what is emerging as a new network format: televised short-form video, backed up by the kind of web video presence pioneered by sites such as [AtomFilms](#), [Ifilm](#) and [ZeD TV](#), among others.

The network touts itself as the first "by the people for the people" network and hopes to capitalize on the latest generation of home video hipsters -- digital mavericks who use low-cost video cameras and video-editing software to produce their own content.

To that end, Current TV is filled with promos and interstitials touting media democracy, with phrases like "Don't take it. Make it." But in reality much of the so-called "viewer created content" is produced by media professionals who are willing to accept Current's modest pay scale of \$250 for the first segment, \$500 for the second and third, \$750 for the fourth and fifth, and \$1,000 for the sixth and beyond, in return for the exposure.

Take David Babrow, for example. The San Francisco producer and motion graphics artist directed a segment called [My Name is Jamie](#), about a Romanian internet sex worker. It's a powerful piece and one that expresses a point of view that is not otherwise represented on TV, but it's hardly amateur. Babrow, who ran a production company called Identity Arts, cleverly used motion graphics and audio to liven up the video content.

Then there's Joe Hanson, an advertising executive whose claim to fame was appearing on the WB's *Beauty and the Geek*. The boyish looking redhead (What is he? 15?) has a [series](#) of hilarious shorts where he visits a dominatrix, a tattoo parlor and enters a hip-hop competition.

Current TV would do well to hire more smart but witty presenters like Hanson rather than the preened, sickeningly insincere porn-star types that they seem to favor for most of their segments.

But right now Current's biggest task is to get in front of viewers. While it can be found on channel 366 on DirecTV, it is available only as an extra on Comcast Digital Cable. Indeed, Wired News had a heck of a time locating a place to watch the new cable channel. Current TV executives were, for some reason, not happy to host a reporter in the company foyer, but eventually agreed to burn a DVD with a sample hour from Aug. 30 programming.

In the long run, the question will be whether the cable channel can generate enough good content to keep people watching. After an hour or two, the pods would most certainly become repetitive. And ultimately, short-form video seems better suited for devices such as the PlayStation, the mobile phone or the iPod than for a television network.

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