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Greening Starts With Us

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We are told that the Internet is the key to success for 21st century business, politics, and culture. It is the foundation of a networked society, the very symbol of progress and plenitude. Along with wireless telecommunications, the internet assures constant connectivity to information hungry customers, who are now paying more than ever to be a part of an expanding digital culture.

Despite the deep recession, global spending on electronics in 2012 will reach \$1 trillion—a 5 percent increase over 2011. Americans can be credited for more than a quarter of this growth, most of which is attributable to demand for mobile devices: laptops, tablets, and smartphones—a love affair with high-tech goods that shows no signs of cooling. The problem is that when this market heats up, so does the environment.

There are fixes
for the
Internet's
environmental
problem, but
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lifestyle.

With over 10 billion devices needing electricity, 15 percent of global residential energy is now spent on powering domestic digital technology. When added to the energy it takes to make and distribute these goods, consumption from digital living translates into carbon emissions that rival aviation. According to the International Energy Agency, if usage continues to grow at this rate, residential electricity needed to power digital culture will rise to 30 percent of global demand by 2022, and 45 percent by 2030.

In addition, our digital life relies on data centers for cloud computing. Their energy demand for power and cooling those centers doubled between 2000 and 2005, and grew about 56 percent between 2005 and 2010, a period when industrial energy usage was otherwise flat. The metaphor of a natural, ephemeral cloud belies the dirty reality of coal-fired energy that feeds most data centers around the world

There are technological fixes for the Internet's environmental problem — moving data centers off the coal-fired power grid and onto hydro-electric, solar, geothermal and other sources; designing energy efficient devices; and using smart grids to regulate and reduce domestic and workplace energy consumption. But these fixes will not succeed without a corresponding transformation of our consumer culture into a culture of sustainability, one that ensures that social, political, and economic development does not exceed or irreversibly damage the Earth's abilities to supply and renew the natural resources upon which we depend.

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