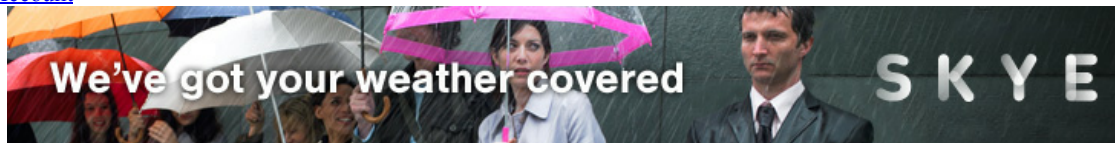


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Greening the Media

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When we were young, our parents warned us not to sit too close to the TV. "Bad for your eyes," they said. No one knew that televisions were zapping

us with radiation, the result of a little design flaw in the color sets sold in the sixties. But those were the days of lead paint, of chemistry sets with mercury droplets, of toy stores that sold radioactive rocks. What child didn't want to mutate radioactively into a superhero?

In the past five decades, popular attitudes towards these hazards have changed dramatically, thanks in part to the way television and other media have taught us to appreciate our planet's natural beauty and beware the dangers that industrial processes pose to the Earth and its inhabitants. The media have covered a host of ecological topics, from environmental science to the ways consumers can live greener lives. But they have failed to explain their own contribution to environmental problems.

A lot of people who work in the media wouldn't consider their jobs as harmful to the environment. But media and communications technologies are rapidly becoming some of the biggest energy consumers in the world. Household electronics were responsible for about 15 percent of global residential electricity consumption in 2009. In many homes, this is more than the power needs of traditional large appliances.

By last year, upwards of ten billion media and communications devices around the world relied on external power supplies. If that rate of growth is maintained, the sector will account for 30 percent of global residential electricity use by 2022, and 45 percent by 2030.

The implications are stark: between 2 and 3 percent of the world's greenhouse gases can be attributed to media technologies. That's about the same as the aerospace industry.

And those fancy new computing clouds that contain your data? Greenpeace estimates that if the cloud were a country, it would be the fifth largest energy consumer in the world. With a few exceptions, the major data centers are doing very little to wean themselves from coal, gas, nuclear, and other dirty or dangerous sources of electricity. To do so requires retrofitting existing plants or moving operations to within reach of renewable energy sources, which Google, Yahoo and Facebook appear to be doing.

The environmental impact of media technologies doesn't end there. While TVs may be safer for viewers today, their disposal poses serious health and environmental risks. Along with computers, monitors, cellphones, and other electronic waste, they are frequently thrown out with the curbside garbage.

This new kind of trash, known as "e-waste," is the fastest-growing component of municipal waste systems -- between 20 and 50 million tons annually worldwide. Wealthy high-tech nations dump 85 percent of their e-waste in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia.

Meanwhile, the workers who make these technologies and dismantle them as e-waste risk exposure to pathogens that can cause cancer and damage the skin, vital organs, and reproductive and nervous systems.

We've all heard about brands like Apple that have contracts with Taiwanese manufacturers who oppress their employees courtesy of military-style discipline. It's fun to click a mouse and accuse righteous Apple execs of misconduct while their hipster consumers squirm with guilt.

But Apple isn't alone. And the real issue isn't Apple or its suppliers. What matters is the opaque global supply chain that allows scoundrels to abuse and poison electronics workers around the world and harm our environment.

It goes without saying that the role of the media in shedding light on the environment is important. But they need to do more. The media must examine the technologies they use to create content and the gadgets that disseminate it.

Expand coverage of the global supply chain, share stories about the people who make and dismantle media technology, and connect the dots between an appreciation of the environment and the media's contribution to the ecological problems that all the Earth's inhabitants face.

Then consumers, citizens, and workers can join together to green the media. It's quite a task, but with transparent governance, smart regulation, scientific acuity, and employee participation, we can get there.

The authors have just published the book [Greening the Media](#), from Oxford University Press.

Richard Maxwell works at Queens College of the City University of New York and Toby Miller at the University of California, Riverside.

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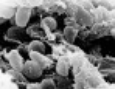
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