Greening the Media

How media technology contributes to the global ecological crisis.
by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.

Kelvin Doe, Ragpicker
Mr. Doe joins the socially valuable but perilous history of artful ragpicking.
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In the last days of November 2012, just after the Presidential election, two million people in just one week watched a video about a young man from Sierra Leone who had constructed a functioning radio station from electronic waste (e-waste) he had found in trash cans.

Massive publicity was generated when 15-year-old Kelvin Doe (a.k.a. “DJ Focus”) visited the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which presented his story as an heroic narrative. Here, they said, was an unlikely Third World prodigy who triumphed over adversity, armed only with dynamic, individual, entrepreneurial qualities. And here we are, a dynamic and benign, albeit wealthy, private university, recognizing such achievement.¹

MIT tells us that Mr. Doe succeeded without outside intervention: he didn’t require government assistance, and, by implication, nor should anybody else. The explicit assumption is that aid programs funded by governments and international organizations don’t work and should be replaced by individual initiative and philanthropic guidance.²

In fact, Kelvin Doe comes from a collective, not an individual tradition, one that testifies to the collaborative creativity and artistry of poor, disadvantaged people, and the crucial roles they play in the creative comforts of others. We’ve met them in the U.S. sitcom Sanford and Son and Nigeria’s Basi and Company. Mos Def and Jack Black play them in the movie Be Kind Rewind. The documentary Waste Land chronicles the artist Vik Muniz’s “Pictures of Garbage Series,” which re-imagines the lives, labors, and dreams of catadores, ragpickers working in the world’s largest garbage dump, outside Rio de Janeiro, where we’ll soon enjoy the World Cup and the Olympics on our screens.

Ragpickers have long fascinated artists, because they embodied precisely things we would rather not look at or touch. Charles Dickens, Charles Baudelaire, ETA Hoffmann, and Émile Zola wrote about them in admiring terms. Vincent van Gogh was inspired by the Hague’s city dump, and Édouard Manet’s Ragpicker trudged disconsolately towards refuse he could not resist. Ragpickers continue to attract fiction writers from China (Ah Chen), Italy (Italo Calvino and Paolo Teobaldi), Austria (Christoph Ramsmayr), the U.S. (Paul Auster and Donald Barthelme), Canada (Daniel Brodeur and Margaret Atwood), France (Michel Tournier), the Czech Republic (Buhomír Hrabal and Ivan Klima), and Costa Rica (Fernando Contrera Castro), among others.

Ragpickers have been urban untouchables since they emerged in 18th-century Europe. Working in primitive sewers, drains, and refuse dumps, they collected and classified rubbish from homes—anything from animal carcasses to human excrement. While the urban rich demanded that unsightly, abject leftovers be safely distant, the lowly ragpickers served as a daily reminder of the realities of urban waste. Please arrive and leave early and so via the back door...
The story remains the same in the era of high-tech trash. Since the 1990s, the richest regions of the world use the poorest as dumping grounds for noxious electronic junk—by 2007, over 80 percent of e-waste was exported to Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where about 1 percent live as ragpickers working to invest unwanted trash with new value—just as Kelvin Doe did.

By the way, they produce the least waste of all urban groups.

Exportation of e-waste is driven by a business strategy to avoid high costs of recycling in wealthy countries and their (selective) regulatory punishments for harming environment and workers. California alone shipped about twenty million pounds of e-waste in 2006 to Mexico, Malaysia, Brazil, South Korea, China, Việt Nam, and India.

E-waste dismantling generates serious health and safety risks: brain damage, headaches, vertigo, nausea, birth defects, diseases of the bones, stomach, lungs, and other vital organs, and disrupted biological development in children. These conditions result from exposure to heavy metals (lead, cadmium, and mercury, among others), burned plastics, and poisonous fumes from melting components for precious metals such as copper and gold.

Today over 700,000 workers collect and disassemble cellphones and computers in China, about 98 percent of them in the informal sector. Consider Guiyu in Guangdong Province. Once a farming town, e-waste has transformed it in three ways: 80 percent of local families have left farming for recycling; contaminants from recycling saturate the human food chain; and persistent organic pollutants in the soil and water prohibit the safe return of affected agricultural lands to future generations.

We can only hope that MIT’s romantic engagement with Kelvin Doe, and the university’s bizarre notion of individualism, do not travel hand in hand with a disavowal of collective responsibility for the unequal exchange of electronic waste and the lives of those who collect and recycle it. Otherwise we shall not have met the real Mr. Doe. Rather, we shall have encountered one more reassuring but partial narrative about entrepreneurial spirit that neglects history—at great cost to us all.


2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88lhMhHyFCw&list=PLTP7oKI8aFmmA cuQna_NfyUly3uhE1&index=2&feature=plcp; see also http://www.gmin.org/innovate-salone/2012/dj-focus