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by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.

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Published on May 28, 2013 by Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D. in Greening the Media

May 2013 was a month of irrational consumption, the kind that overhypes digital technologies and leads to mountains of electronic waste.

An Apple-1 personal computer sold for \$671,400 at auction in Germany—a crowning moment when a PC became part of high culture, valued as a rare artifact of a famous brand's folkloric history. What once was cheap and common was transmogrified into a stylish collector's item.¹

At the opposite end of the technology cycle, Sony unveiled its new 4K TV, an ultra-high definition set. The new appliance is cheap by contrast with the venerable Apple-1, but paying \$7000 for a TV is asking a lot when the principal networks aren't making programs for ultra-HD yet. Such expensive innovations are routine in the corporate quest for advantage in consumer markets—they build a rarity in hopes it will become its opposite. But without content—the proverbial “killer app”—the 4K TV could become obsolete before its time, adding further to Sony's failing electronics business.²



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While auctioning old PCs beats dumping them in ways that lead to environmental and medical disasters, selling high-tech trash as high-priced antiquities is clearly not the way to solve the e-waste problem. *Antiques Road Show* can hype early personal-computing machines as the “new frontier of collectables,” but don't count on techno-nostalgia saving the planet from the billions of homely yet toxic monitors, cell phones, and inkjet printers.³

And unless electronics businesses stop building obsolescence into every innovation, their designs will guarantee endless streams of digital garbage, the poisonous byproduct of unnecessary growth.

Two factors could make a difference in solving the e-waste problem: our roles as consumers and citizens. But first we need to stop seeing these roles the way electronics businesses see them—as split personalities.

They promote their products as if we were one-dimensional consumers, individualistic desiring machines, out to please ourselves, to maximize utility, as the *cliché* has it. By contrast, they compartmentalize our citizenly selves, our recycling personae—those selfless, collectively-minded souls, standing in solidarity with others. We act either through egotism or altruism, but never through both simultaneously—one self must have the latest gadget, society be damned; the other self reads *Consumer Reports* and worries about genetically modified foods.

While such stark contrasts seem unreal, they operate like a powerful ideology when we make purchasing decisions. We know our consuming and citizenly selves overlap and have things in common, but the marketing appeal to the just-got-to-have-it side of us reinforces the business version of our identities.

The good news is that, when it comes to e-waste, resistance to this

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ideology seems to be growing.

New research into the views of US householders on e-waste management has analyzed responses to California's 2004 Cell Phone Recycling Act. It shows the legislation has been more effective than similar governmental attempts to regulate disposal of old TVs, which was poorly promoted and enforced. The researchers recommend focusing appeals for responsible e-waste disposal on two groups who showed the greatest interest in tackling the problem: women of all ages and men under 60.⁴

Clearly, there is resistance to profligate consumption, but we still have a lot of work ahead of us. Half of the German population (where that Apple-1 was sold) already recycles electronics, while the figure is just 25% across the US. And Australians have managed to create a National Television and Computer Recycling Scheme.⁵

Meanwhile, businesses are slowly getting into the act. The Coalition for American Electronics Recycling (CAER), representing the major corporate players in the sector, estimates that their members recycled over a billion pounds of e-waste in 2012, paying \$250 million to almost seven thousand workers to do so. That leaves over three and a half billion pounds polluting the nation's landfills each year. CAER predicts that tough, comprehensive national legislation mandating change could generate tens of thousands more jobs and boost their members' bottom line.⁶

These examples of consumer-citizen rationality and enlightened corporate self-interest may foretell the end of irrational consumption. They show that people are ready to push for legislation that can produce the institutional changes backed by e-waste policy experts: force producers to take responsibility for the post-consumption disposal of their gadgets; stimulate recycling through financial incentives; mandate proper disposal; and teach consumers about the risks of e-waste.

Some of these initiatives concentrate on appealing to the collective good, some to one's pocket book, and some to the risk of punitive state action. To the consternation of business-as-usual ideologues, these recommendations speak to the consumer-citizen's multidimensional traits that mix together green moral norms, individual gratification, social well-being, shareholder value, intergenerational care, and solidarity across municipal, regional, Federal, and international scales of life.⁷





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