

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

Greening the Media

# At Home Or At School, If It's Garbage In, It's Garbage Out

Why we need to cut the trash—and cut the smartphone

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We present two challenges in this column. After demonstrating that Americans are the waste royalty of the planet, we examine whether new communications technologies can counter this tendency by generating smarter people and smarter consumption.

Americans eat more, drink more, and throw more stuff out than anybody else. Don't trust us—look at what those wacko leftist radicals over at Scientific American, National Geographic, and the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development have to say on the subject.<sup>1</sup>

The US amounts to a twentieth of the globe's population, but generates 50% of its solid waste. Europeans are responsible for 287 pounds less per person each year than us.

Why? The trend in other countries is away from our traditional means of dealing with the rubbish created in homes, schools, and offices—burying or burning it, in landfills or incinerators—and towards recycling these substances back into the economy and culture of everyday life.

And in case you think US hyper-consumption is about being affluent, think again: each American creates twice as much refuse as the average Brit and more again than folks in Japan. Last we looked, those nations did pretty well on quality-of-life indices and disposable income.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, we refuse sustainable transportation by contrast with other developed nations—less than one in ten Americans bother with mass transit, and just a third walk or ride a bike to their destinations.

At the same time, two-thirds of us own smartphones (up from 35% in 2011). They are most popular among people aged under thirty.<sup>3</sup>

Could these little devices, with their bounty of information, entertainment, and communication, make us more knowledgeable and less wasteful?

After all, they allow us to buy fewer communications technologies—we shan't all need laptops, desktops, and tablets, because just one gadget combines those functions so well. We might also argue that by connecting people, smartphones give them a sense of solidarity, of togetherness, against the isolation of life in suburbia, the countryside, or adolescence. They even provide instant methods for calculating our carbon footprints!<sup>4</sup>

But there is another garbage problem here—the garbage of communication.

Because on the other hand, we could mention that smartphones create obstacles to learning due to lack of attentiveness to schoolwork and the trivial nature of much electronic interaction. There is the sense that our



8. <https://web.stanford.edu/dept/CTL/ClassroomLaptops/wikiupload/1/17/Multi...>  
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0360131512002254>.

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<http://top.sagepub.com/content/41/1/44.abstract>;  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03634523.2015.1038727>;  
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