

**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.¹

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.²

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.³

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!⁴

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

children, colleagues, and indeed ourselves are never quite ‘there’—not fully present—when these devices are in play.

The World Bank’s international survey of policies on smartphones in school is ambivalent on this point. Some countries find that pupils using phones lose focus; others ‘feel’ they benefit from quick access to on-line resources.⁵ New York City just ended a lengthy ban on phones at school as ineffective and undesirable.⁶

But the science shows that cell phones have a negative educational impact. For ‘low-achieving and at-risk students,’ banning their use is ‘equivalent to an additional hour a week in school, or to increasing the school year by five days.’⁷

And college? Cornell’s renowned “Laptop and the Lecture” study, published in 2003, showed that lecture attendees remembered lessons better if they did not use laptops during class. Lots of research in the decade since has confirmed the risks of technological multitasking with smartphones and the value of note taking with pen and paper rather than digitally—and not only for those doing so; other students get distracted by people typing in ways they do not when surrounded by old-style notetaking.⁸

No surprise, then, that many of Dartmouth’s computer-science Faculty find that programming classes (yes, programming classes) are so disrupted by students using these technologies for shopping and social interaction that they become unable to focus on ... programs.⁹

The research even shows, paradoxically, that students who engage heavily in media multitasking are worse than others when given multiple tasks to do. Sending texts and engaging with social media seriously diminish these capacities and learning in general.¹⁰

Garbage in, garbage out?

It’s time to look at the science of the trash we produce and share, in both municipal and educational contexts.

The belief that technology can fix pedagogic problems is as improbable as the belief that a tiny minority of the world needs to consume so much of its bounty.

The US once led the way in environmental awareness. We still do so in communications technology and college education. Let’s put the research about waste and cell phones to work so we can revive our protection of nature and maintain our research and pedagogic status.

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<http://www.oecd.org/environment/environment-at-a-glance-19964064.htm>.

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4. <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/unep-carbon-calculator/id479908091?mt=8>.

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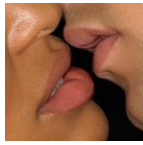
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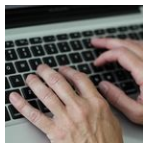
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