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Greening the Media

Taking Egoism Out of Consumerism

Two part series: egoism/consumerism vs. solidarity/sustainability: part I

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There are many good reasons to share stories about the hardships that are faced by the factory workers who supply the world with high-tech electronics. The most obvious is that a compelling scene of assembly-line routines can open our eyes to the human origins of our devices, which is generally beyond consumers' horizons. Of course, that issue applies not just to electronics: we don't usually think about the origins of our soap, clothes, or cars. They seem to arrive at retail outlets fully formed, without any outward sign of their histories. So, it is a healthy reminder that somewhere someone is making the things we need and want.

But when the stories turn to certain kinds of suffering, unimaginable to most shoppers in affluent consumer societies, our tendency is to stop thinking. It is hard to comprehend that in the year 2015, young people in Korea and elsewhere in the world's factories are contracting diseases like leukemia, lymphoma, breast cancer, brain tumors, and ovarian cancer while making computer chips and fancy flat screens for our phones and TVs. Documented cases of neurological disorders afflicting scores of workers who clean finished tablets and laptops don't belong on book shelves (or computer files) in our tidy homes.¹ These aren't like the heart-warming stories of labor we are quick to share when showing off artisanal goods that we've bought from a local farmers market or fair-trade online retailer. And the fact is that billions of electronic gadgets arrive with a toxic pedigree that most of us would like to forget.

In contrast, news about digital devices making consumers sick in affluent societies has less of a problem being taken seriously. We have discussed some of these concerns in previous columns—tumors linked to cell phone radiation, traffic accidents and fatalities caused by distracted texters and mobile users, toxins from electronics discarded in landfills, rising carbon emissions associated with energy demand from high-tech goods, and nervous disorders related to over-connectivity.²

Of all these ailments, mental health has sparked the most public curiosity in the US and other wealthy countries (and among growing numbers of affluent consumers in the developing world, too). So much so, that new businesses have sprung up to take advantage of growing demand for treatment of mental distress caused by these reported problems. A new line of cures for internet addiction, for example, has lately been making headlines across the world—from China to Silicon Valley to Spain.³

The idea of internet addiction is the latest in a long litany of ailments associated with modern life—in the 19th century, a medical doctor named George Beard said Americans suffered from "neurasthenia" caused by the acceleration of life lived to the rhythms of rail, telegraph, and the daily press. William James nicknamed this new pathology Americanitis. Theodore Roosevelt and Jane Addams were numbered among its victims, and new potions of suspect origin were marketed to help soothe the suffering. Freud agreed that such neuroses of civilization multiplied with growing affluence, but countered that they were due in large part to faulty unconscious processes rather than external stimuli.⁴

Internet addiction might be gaining popularity as the one-stop diagnosis for the digital age, but it has yet to be

recognized among the 300 mental illnesses that the American Psychiatric Association lists in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. Nevertheless, we expect continued interest in the idea of internet addiction if the spread of psychological distresses continues to be linked to affluence and the vicissitudes of American style consumerism.⁵

Regardless of whether it is real enough to merit action, the belief that internet addiction is a sickness has inspired the institutionalization of treatments, which, unsurprisingly, is all about making money. Whether it's the militarized regimen of the Internet Addiction Treatment Centre in Daxing, China or the breezy Camp Grounded in Mendocino, California, the business model is based on having "patients" pay for learning basic exercise routines and non-electronic forms of communication.⁶ People with itchy palms aching to touch smartphones and tablets are calmed and returned to the world as steady, and somewhat fitter, consumers.

Readers of this column will suspect that concocting an individual pathology from the woes of digital culture is not a forward-looking solution for healthy living. For one thing, it's not the inward looking consumer who we should be examining—they're always a few tech-free moments short of tranquility, their egoism placing too much emphasis on self-centered ailments and cures. The alternative to such egoism is the outward and conscious cultivation of collective solutions, which we will examine in our next column.

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