



**Richard Maxwell, Ph.D. and Toby Miller, Ph.D.**  
Greening the Media

# The Things We Carry

How imported products add to America's job of cleaning the environment

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Think globally, act locally. The concept just celebrated its centenary. What began as a core principle of 20th-century Scottish town planning is known today as a mainstay of grassroots environmentalism and enlightened consumerism. The gist of the mantra is clear: we live in an interconnected world, our conduct has an impact beyond our local existence, and we should act appropriately.

The reason we invoke the phrase here is that it captures the way in which many consumers and policy-makers have formulated solutions to global warming—we must cut emissions where we live by passing laws, changing industrial practices, and modifying our use of natural resources within the borders of our communities, states, and nations.

Most forms of green citizenship are tied to this principle of sovereign territorial duty. We act locally to do our part for the planet and hope that citizens of other countries do the same. It encapsulates the framework for grading the emissions records of 195 (potential) signatory nations to the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change. And it reflects the geographical perspective of green accountancy, which adds the value of depletions and recoveries of ecosystems within national borders to account for an expanded definition of territorial productivity, typically represented in non-green terms by Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Within the logic of thinking globally and acting locally, it makes sense to put the burden for solving our global climate challenge onto national projects that assess emissions and mitigate causes of global warming within their own territories. The Paris Agreement helps this along by asking richer nations to help build capacity in developing countries to meet emission reduction targets. International solidarity of this kind will be vital to the Agreement's implementation.

But we think it might be a mistake to rely on this idea alone to guide how we reduce ecological harm and other social liabilities of our high-tech, industrial economies.

What if the territorial model of one global climate/many separate nations divides the responsibility for mitigation of harms unfairly? We don't mean this in the sense that it's unfair to ask China or India to forego developing in the same manner that the US or UK economies did. While that is certainly important, and a key dilemma within climate change geopolitics, we have another kind of inequity in mind.

Our concern derives from the need to connect consumption in the US to the global trade of electronic goods produced in a vast global supply chain. We have looked at this process before in this column, tying it to, among other things, slave-like working conditions in China and elsewhere, consumerist barriers to thinking compassionately about these workers, and rising energy demands in order to operate all the digital gadgetry Americans now own. We have also posited the idea of a culture of sustainability in opposition to consumerism as an overall strategy for green citizenship. But defining what this means is not easy, in particular when we start out from a territorial model of productivity of wealth and, with a nod to green accountancy, of pollution

and other atmospheric liabilities.

Consider carbon emissions associated with the consumption of imported electronics and other digital goods. There is research on national electricity demand in producing countries and in their counterpart consuming countries where all the mobile phones, computers, consumer electronics, and the like need electricity to function.

But there's no account of how emissions in a producing country might be attributed to demand in a consuming one. Carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases (GHG) contained within foreign-produced goods—what is carried with them to markets of final destination—is not typically found in national statistics. And we lack research that measures the environmental impact of demand for imported goods. Until now.

In a recently published paper in *The Journal of Industrial Ecology*, researchers at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology have presented a novel way of addressing this problem. While the study does not separate out electronic products for analysis, it offers a useful model that could be extended to digital imports.

The authors acknowledge that a national focus on industrial activity is suitable for international and national policy-making alike, but argue that it doesn't help us understand exactly how household consumption, lifestyle, and other "social determinants" contribute to environmental harms.

They zero in on consumption in order to quantify the environmental footprints (GHG and depleted land, water, and raw materials) that are traded along with the imported goods—or as they put it, the "portion of the emissions and resource use ... embodied in internationally traded commodities."<sup>1</sup>

The authors demonstrate why countries like Norway and the US are net importers of GHG, emitting about twice as much CO<sub>2</sub> as is reported in national statistics. And while regional impacts vary across consumption categories, wealthy consumer societies are shown to have the highest per capita impacts on the environment, because of their high rates of imported goods and services.

Without getting lost in the details, suffice it to say that this research marks the beginning of an important turn in how we can identify new ways to green our media technologies within a framework of sustainable consumption.

The authors propose that consumer behavior in wealthy nations must change. That won't be easy to implement in the US, since most Americans view wasteful consumption as a god-given right. But the study clearly illustrates the need to rethink how we distribute responsibility for reducing carbon emissions by looking at the embodied environmental harms in trade flows of goods and services.

Even if wealthy countries continue to take the lead in decreasing greenhouse gases within their own territories, the dependence on imports from low-wage, high emission regions could "offset, or even revert, gains in efficiency and climate change mitigation actions in developed countries." This is a different sort of global thinking that could reshape not only how we act in the world but also how national leaders talk about trade, global warming, and employment.

1. Diana Ivanova, Konstantin Sadler, Kjartan Steen-Olsen, Richard Wood, Gibran Vita, Arnold Tucker, and Edgar Hertwich. "Environmental Impact Assessment of Household Consumption." *Journal of Industrial Ecology*. December 18, 2015. Np <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jiec.12371/epd>



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