



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

# Worries about the Apple Watch and the Internet-of-Things

It's really not scary—provided you imagine you're in control

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Posted May 03, 2015



Let the frenzy begin. The new Apple Watch is all the rage, even though 80 percent of orders won't be shipped for weeks, maybe months. As always, professional watchers of high-tech trends (now able to wear a pun on their wrists) aren't just selling a commodity; these latter-day Dick Tracys also spread faith in the magic of machines, willingly throwing themselves into each new gadget's enveloping mist of enchantment and telling us that we should join them. The repetitive nature of this tendency is comically signaled by the fact that the watch's most hyped functions only work when it's paired to the company's smartphone. When not tethered, it can store music and other downloaded information, pay for stuff using your credit card information, and check your heartbeat when you do. It also tells time. But you must charge it daily for the privilege.<sup>1</sup>

Like other computerized fashion accessories, Apple's watch shows that the digital environment we inhabit is no freewheeling cosmos of media that evolved from our imaginations. No, the digital environment of wearable computers is a place where things relate only to other things, leaving the body electric with the dubious choice of dangling by haptic puppet strings or foregoing the delights of algorithmic connectedness. We might imagine otherwise, but we relinquish a little more digital freedom each time we click on "I Agree."

The watch also makes it clear that the *ur*-object in the internet-of-things is not the smart appliance, self-driving car, or mobile and wearable device—it's us. We are the most important of all interchangeable objects—albeit of varying strategic value—in this "sensor-rich, data scooping future."<sup>2</sup> And this thingness is hardened by our participation in a growth-obsessed political economy where consumerism delivers the hallowed liberties of shopping: displaying ourselves, pinging our whereabouts, and submitting our imaginations to the pattern recognition of computer code.

Many environmentalists argue that such consumerism tends to sever people's sensuous bond to our earthly plenitude. The most disturbing paradox of our thingness thrives in the absence of that bond: we live as devices of our own devices rather than acting like inhabitants of a living planet. Marxists used to call this the *reification of life*.<sup>3</sup> When we reached the highest stage of our thingy evolution in the 20th century, we crossed the line of sustainability, losing a sense of balance between what the Earth can give to human activity then safely re-absorb.

Labor-rights advocates also see a key social bond severed by consumerism when the commodity becomes so delightfully attractive that we forget about the workers who made it. To counter such an ethical lapse, China Labor Watch, a pro-worker organization, sent an undercover investigator to a Chinese factory that makes Apple Watches. Among the barbarities they found: 70,000 workers hammered by Apple's demands to deliver the new product on time; 12-16 hour days, six days a week; unpaid overtime; illegal hiring fees charged to workers; illegal child labor; excessive use of temporary employees; scant health and safety training; exposure to toxic chemicals and insufficient protective equipment; cramped and unhealthy living quarters; abusive management; prison-like restrictions of movement and speech; forced labor and resignation fees; no grievance channels; and

poisons seeping into surrounding waterways.<sup>4</sup>

It's as if we've become not just a species-for-things, but also a species-of-things, unable to relate as ecosystem inhabitants and compassionate humans. The world's consumers spend about US\$1 trillion a year on electronics. There are over 14 billion *network-enabled* electronic devices needing electricity today, at a rate equal to 15 percent of the total global residential energy in use. Without any changes to this trend, the residential electricity needed to power our digital conveniences will rise to 30 percent of global consumption by 2022, and 45 percent by 2030. This includes billions of dollars worth of electricity wasted while these network devices are on "standby."<sup>5</sup>

This doesn't even include the energy consumed in manufacturing digital technologies, mobile communication, and junking and recycling gadgets. Consider for a moment the monumental energy needed by the nascent internet-of-things to power data centers and telecommunication networks that connect mobile devices and service providers and charge devices.<sup>6</sup> Our love affair with high-wattage goods emits carbon at an increasingly dangerous rate, imperiling future generations.

There is still time to escape the mists of digital enchantment. We can wake up to the challenges of climate change, ocean acidification, and a planet overdosed with nitrogen. We know how to reduce the massive levels of conventional pollution. We might not stop the sixth great extinction—which our thing-loving species has caused—but we might be able to conserve certain habitats and mitigate our rapidly diminishing biodiversity.

The Apple Watch is coming, but let's not let it distract us from our mission to care for the environment and each other. Time is running out.

1. <http://www.cnet.com/news/apple-watch-without-your-iphone/>
2. <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/04/26/envisioning-a-future-when-senso...>
3. [http://www.academia.edu/1777558/The\\_Reification\\_of\\_Life](http://www.academia.edu/1777558/The_Reification_of_Life)
4. <http://www.chinalaborwatch.org/newscast/434>; <http://radaronline.com/photos/apple-watch-sweatshop-scandal-cramped-dorm...>
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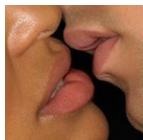
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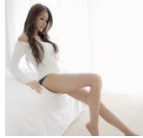


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