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E-Waste and Media Studies

My family got their first computer in 1994, when I was 13 years of age, which was pretty normal for my generation as most of my friends had access to computers since the early nineties. Only after having started my studies at the university Mainz in 2003, I decided to get my own computer - but whereas this computer is still in use today, I have replaced my monitor six times in five years. That was because tube monitors seemed to be flying at me from every direction: friends and family members, who had switched to flat screens, offered me their obsolete CRT monitors for free or for ridiculously low prices. I cannot remember how many times I declined their offers with thanks because, of course, I only looked for better and larger models than the one I was using at the time.

I never spared a thought what will happen to my discarded monitors, I just did not connect computer equipment to pollution. I guessed that a world that produces such perfect machines must have thought of ways of secure recycling. Disillusion came to me when I googled “e-waste” and watched videos of electronic trash being exported to China, India or Nigeria and saw the immense pollution caused by western e-waste dumped in those countries. The global e-waste issue remains one of the most alarming environmental threats of the current Digital Age. Much of the electronic trash produced and discarded in the industrialized world is still being shipped to developing countries where it is recycled under primitive circumstances or simply dumped, menacing human health and the environment. Like with most environmental crimes, the reasons for exporting e-waste are economic ones, as it is more profitable to export to developing countries than to recycle in the West.

When I started researching the topic I soon found out that the United States was the main culprit with exporting 50 to 80 per cent of its e-waste to developing countries for recycling under terrible circumstances.¹ The European Union on the other hand had strict regulations and directives such as the WEEE (Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment) and the RoHS (Restriction of Hazardous Substances) and unlike the United States all European nations signed the Basel Convention of 1992. However, the Seaport Project, a joint enforcement project of six European countries, in their 2004 final report tracked illegally and falsely declared shipments and found e-waste leaving ports like Rotterdam, Hamburg and Felixstowe bound for West Africa, China and Pakistan.² The absence of transfrontier controls makes shipments within the EU difficult to track and facilitates the so called “port-hopping,” a method used to obscure the traces of illegal waste.³ So how can e-waste get to developing and non-OECD countries (which is prohibited in the Basel Convention)?

Computers, monitors and other High Tech equipment coming from the EU were found in Western Africa; they were declared as second hand goods or foreign aid, although the devices were broken or not compatible with each other.⁴ The loophole lies in the definition of the shipment: exporting of e-waste is illegal only when it is clearly declared as *waste*, if, however, one declared old electronic devices as *products* the export becomes legal, even though they might not be suitable for reuse.⁵

¹ See <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/campaigns/toxics/hi-tech-highly-toxic/e-waste-goes> (accessed 9-9-2008)

² An overall of about 20 per cent of all waste shipments were declared illegal, see http://www.inece.org/conference/7/vol1/41_Isarin.pdf p. 251 (accessed 9-9-2008)

³ see Grossmann, Elizabeth *High Tech Trash* pp. 203f.

⁴ See <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/news/poisoning-the-poor-electroni> (accessed 9-9-2008)

⁵ See <http://www.sam-rlp.de/> (accessed 9-9-2008)

As long as laws are bended in such a way the best regulations remain no more than ideals and wishful thinking. The European Union, alongside the United States and most other developed countries, contributes to the global e-waste danger, not because they wish to but because they let money set the rules of the game.

The “flat screen revolution” was the most dramatic of the digital revolutions that I witnessed and it exemplifies a certain wish for minimalism; not in the virtual, but in the material world. We seem to ask: “Why should something that is being used two-dimensionally be three-dimensionally and occupy a quarter of my desk?” The actual machine that does all the work becomes smaller and lighter and disappears from the sight of its user. Similar tendencies can be observed with mobile phones, mp3 music players and TVs. Smallness, weightlessness, technical novelty, trends and design pull us to the stores and make us get rid of our older devices.

These characteristics of our modern, digitalized society read like irony compared to the pictures I still have in my mind of little children burning cables or rivers flooded with e-waste. The responsibility, as it seems, cannot be fully carried by governments, recyclers and bussiness persons; we as consumers always, and in the days of the globalization more than ever, have to be aware of what we consume and start acting on our own. This holds true not only for electronics but also for food and attire, for instance, where similar injustice, pollution and exploration takes place.
