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Fast Machines, Slow Violence: ICTs, Planned Obsolescence, and E-waste

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Abstract

This paper brings the temporalities of the global e-waste recycling trade into the temporal reckonings of speed, acceleration, and simultaneity typically associated with information and communications technologies (ICTs). Following feminist philosopher Sofia, it begins with a reconsideration of theories of technology as they relate to time and the environment. The second part of the paper suggests that recycling practices do not address the tempos of production, especially planned obsolescence. Bringing together Nixon's concept of slow violence with Sofia's theory of container technologies, this paper interrogates the speed, acceleration, and simultaneity often attributed to ICTs and globalization to argue that planned obsolescence functions as a type of slow violence, and that it structures the environmental politics of the information age.

Keywords:

time e-waste ICTs recycling planned obsolescence

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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1 There are arguably many other ways of understanding time at work here, but I focus only on the speeds typically associated with ICTs in discussions of time, technology, and globalization. See Nixon's (2011) Slow violence and Adam's (1998) Timescapes of modernity for discussions of the other timescapes of technology and nature.

2 For a fascinating account of the containment problems of ocean vessels, see Moby Duck, which describes the journey of a plastic duck bath toy that travels the oceans after containers are lost at sea.

3 See Smith, Sonnenfeld, and Pellow's Challenging the chip (2006).

4 Apple defines ‘vintage’ computers as those between five and seven years old and ‘Genius Bars’ will not service them.

Additional information

Notes on contributors

Sabine LeBel

Dr Sabine LeBel is an adjunct professor at the University College Writing Centre and in the Arts, Culture, and Media Department at the University of Toronto, where she teaches a visual culture class and is developing a course on media and the environment. Her Ph.D. is in Communication and Culture from York University in Toronto, Canada. Working in the area of environmental media studies, her research is in the areas of waste, affect, and the visual. She is currently a researcher with the Techno-Trash project, a web project that examines personal historiographies of e-waste. She has published in peer-reviewed journals such as NANO: New American Notes Online (forthcoming), Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme, Cineaction, and Communications + 1.

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