

Review: Greening the Media
By Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller

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Maxwell, Richard and Miller, Toby. *Greening the Media*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 246pp. ISBN 9780195325201, paper.

As his previous publications have proven, a new book by prolific scholar Toby Miller is always instructive, clear, thought-provoking, and enlightening. For this interdisciplinary collaborative work, the distinguished professor of media studies at the University of California is now working with Professor Richard Maxwell (from the University of New York) in order to investigate the environmental hazards linked with the production and disposal of the new media technologies, especially cell phones, HD television sets, computers and laptops. The authors argue that all these apparently neat, new technologies are in fact highly polluting, not only because they are short-lived, easily obsolete and frequently replaced, but primarily because of their very dangerous components that have to be manipulated during both production and disassembly before the recycling process.

As the authors write, students in communication and media studies are not taught these issues because most university professors are not aware of the environmental dimensions related to the electronic media they use daily: “media students and professors generally arrive at, inhabit, and depart universities with a focus on textuality, technology, and/or reception; they rarely address where texts and technologies physically come from or end up” (p. 10). The focus here is on these metal boxes full of electronics and dangerous chemical poisons, that are produced and consumed, bought and cherished, as if their real existence was only limited to the short period of time they are actually part of our lives. However, things are beginning to change: “consumer curiosity about the material provenance of commodities has begun to pose new ethical challenges to corporate defenders of the consumer society” (p. 24). In Chapter 2, the authors highlight the fact that too many media experts are looking in the wrong direction, and therefore, they aim to examine “the tendency to regard each emergent medium as awe inspiring and world changing relies on recurring myths of technological power in the absence of acknowledging environmental and labor realities” (p. 43).

Greening the Media begins at the heart of the problem: the endless consumption of new technologies (p. 22). Consumerism remains the main contradiction in environmental issues because it is obsessively linked with the “growth ideology” and a “green commodity discourse”, which “promotes the magical fusion of environmentalism with growth, profits, and pleasure” (p. 25). Maxwell and Miller are also worried about the green capitalist discourses that simultaneously encourage more consumption and more environmental awareness (p. 25). Overall, the authors do not warn about the future or “what might happen if”...; rather, they put the spotlight on what is happening now in the poorest countries because consumers always want newer digital technologies using hazardous components.

Chapter 4 investigates in detail the too numerous Third World workers who, while disassembling the parts of our technology such as printers and microwaves, are exposed to solvents, inks, batteries, dangerous metals and radiation during the recycling process (p. 87). As the authors formulate this issue: “Since the nineteenth century, capitalism has largely treated labour and the environment as things to be controlled long distance”, with a division of labour (p. 88). The final chapter on environmental citizenship acknowledges the efforts being made and indicates

possible directions (p. 142). Surprisingly, the authors even praise environmental awareness for the new accountants of the future (p. 136).

Essential for public, college, and university libraries, *Greening the Media* is a very strong book that not only brings appropriate questions and balanced discussions, but also provides constructive answers and ethical solutions (see the section on “What can consumers do about it?”, p. 30). Each page is instructive, dense, well-written, vivid, and quite unique in its bridging of media studies, environmental studies, and a fierce critique of science and technocracy in a constructive way. Scholars and even undergraduates in these fields, but also in education and social sciences (and why not students in business, management, and finance as well?) would learn a lot from these lucid pages. Let’s hope this timely book will soon be translated in other languages.

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