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INFO415: Environmental Interventions

Short Essay 1

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### American Consumerism and Waste Production

Americans today have issues with garbage. Particularly, we have issues with garbage that comes from the products we use every day. These problems, however, are not new. They stem from the early days of American industrialization where advances in technology allowed factories to increase levels of production and therefore increase the number of goods available to the consumers. Rapid production, however, quickly became problematic, and coupled with World War II, when there was not enough demand for the newly increased supply, surpluses weakened the economy until the 1950s, when companies were forced to devise alternatives. The solution they developed, while addressing the problem of surplus goods and a weakened economy, created a new, even greater issue – one that we still feel the effects of today. The problem producers created is paradoxical in nature, as is its solution, but the direct environmental impact of these solutions is of greater concern as technology continues to develop. The problem of waste produced as a byproduct of consumer goods is becoming such an issue today, especially in light of the new, most hazardous technological wastes entering the flow, that we must reevaluate our practices and develop interventions to offset, if not completely eliminate the environmental impact of our spending habits.

The problem of excess household waste has its roots in the 1950s economic recession. Until this time, Americans revered quality, durability, and frugality. However, as corporations and the government began to feel the pressure of the recession, a complete overhaul of the American consumer culture was put into action. The resulting paradigm shift from utilitarianism and functionality to style, modernity, and perceived social benefits was achieved by introducing to American consumers the notions of patriotic spending, obsolescence, and disposability. They instilled in the American consumer the notion of “buy the best and replace it often for the good of America”.

“Patriotic spending” is a tactic used by ad agencies during the 1950s and 60s to promote spending as a means of bolstering the fragile economy. During the recession in the 1950s, when the state of the economy became a mounting concern, a press conference was held during which President Eisenhower was asked what people should do to make the recession recede, President Eisenhower responded, “Buy.” When asked to be

more specific, he responded “Anything.” (Packard 17). It is at this point that the origin of the essential brainwashing that made Americans into the prodigal purchasers they are today becomes evident. From this point forward, ad agencies played into the post-War patriotic spirit in their target consumers and evoked a sense of spending for the good of the nation. Marketing campaigns of the time boiled down to the same premise. “If you are a good American you ought to buy a new [insert consumer good here]” (Packard 59). It was also during this time that credit was established and credit cards became highly popularized so that one could “support the USA” by buying more on borrowed money.

Obsolescence is perhaps one of the most calculated marketing ploys of this time. Producers of the fifties and sixties paid very careful attention to three key factors that determined the lifespan of their product: “obsolescence of function”, “obsolescence of quality”, and “obsolescence of desirability” (Packard 55). While the first was actually a mark of progress, the latter two were simply designed to increase sales with little to no innovation. Obsolescence was developed as a way to renew or reinvigorate the market simply by making minor, often only cosmetic changes. Producers were slyly manipulating the market so that consumers were not only provoked to buy, but buy often as the lifespan of products was shortened through physical, mechanical, and even psychological means (Packard). It is an artifact still evident in today’s markets.

A contemporary illustration of this premeditated obsolescence is the iPod. Apple, without explicitly admitting so, has designed the iPod so that it fits each of these factors. Obsolescence of function comes into play, for example, in the latest iteration of the iPod line wherein you need a wi-fi enabled iPod (the iPod Touch) in order to benefit from many of the new features. Obsolescence of quality is quite evident in the case of the iPod’s irreplaceable battery, which is known to diminish in quality in as short as a year’s time (Apple). Finally, the iPod is arguably the consumer electronic most subject to the grip of obsolescence of desirability. On September 5, 2007, Apple introduced a completely revamped line of iPods. The iPod Shuffle was the only product to simply receive a cosmetic facelift. It now comes in jewel tones instead of neons. This not only reinvigorates the sales of the Shuffle, but it also separates the “new” owners from the “old”. Having the latest iPod is considered a metric for social status in some circles. You would not want to be caught with last year’s colors, would you?

The final factor that has woven its way into the very fabric of American consumer culture is that of disposability. It is here that perhaps one of the most common “eco-infractions” of today has its roots. One of the greatest advances in technology and innovation of this era was that of the disposable can.

And a steel company, in a television commercial, showed a pleased housewife dropping a metal can that had contained soft drinks into the wastebasket. No fussing with returns! (Packard 42)

Here, plain as day, we have the origin of our current recycling issues. Since the norm established in the 1950s as a household convenience was to simply throw your cans in the trash, most people have grown up with that norm. “No fussing with returns” is the complete opposite of what we preach today. While producers attempted to make life “easier” by promoting “progress through the throwaway spirit” (Packard 42), they succeeded in creating the habits we, as contemporary Americans, are trying so hard to break.

In the process of implementing this solution, however, these executives managed to completely alter the way the majority of Americans view consumerism and produced a consumer culture that has far outlived the recession it attempted to alleviate. It is the same culture that exists today and is the same one responsible for our current garbage issues. Because this new consumer culture is so deeply rooted in the notions of materialistic wealth and social status through consumption, an inherent byproduct of this lifestyle, coupled with the factors of obsolescence, is waste. Quite like the modernist era where technologies were implemented without much consideration for other factors that could produce unforeseen consequences, our overproduction is a result of the technology we have developed to increase the speed of production in general. Similar to Parkinson’s Law’s application to work, Say’s Law essentially states that consumption will grow to fit the level of production. Herein lies the paradox. If the path to economic prosperity is production (Say’s Law) and the path to environmental prosperity is reduction, then it would appear that there is no viable solution in sight.

This paradox is furthered when we consider the more social effects of this garbage issue. The entities that produce the goods that we bring into our homes are not independent of the consumer himself. Consumers are not strictly consumers. They are also employees, family members, and merchants who rely on

the success of the good for their livelihood. “We are all ‘disheartened’ at the amount of waste we produce, yet we all have some sort of vested interest in its accelerated perpetuation” (Packard 7). In other words, although one may have objections to the amount of packaging used or the overall quality of the good, he or she may have a stake in its success and will therefore continue to consume it.

American overconsumption is becoming an even greater issue as the items that we dispose become more and more hazardous. As technology progresses, we are faced with “skyrocketing rates of obsolescence” (Grossman 143). Moore’s Law<sup>1</sup> has made it such that technology is arguably obsolete by the time one gets it into his or her home.

The average life span of a computer is about three years. The electronics industry estimates a cell phone’s life span to be only two years, while a TV may last as long as thirteen or fifteen years...the number of TVs that could soon be rendered obsolete is enormous. When and if broadcasters move to the digital format,... your conventional TV will no longer function as is.

(Grossman 144)

Because today’s technology is produced with many hazardous materials including heavy metals and gases, proper disposal has become of great concern. “The United Nations Environment Programme says that ‘e-waste represents the biggest and fastest growing manufacturing waste’” (Grossman 145). To make matters worse, as household consumption of these technologies becomes more and more widespread, the waste produced by the rate of obsolescence grows exponentially.

The Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition [estimates] that by 2006 over 163,000 computers and TVs will become obsolete every day – a bundle of e-waste likely to weigh in at more than 3,500 tons. As for cell phones, the high-tech item with the fastest turnover, the EPA anticipates that by the end of the 2005 discarded cell phones will have created approximately 65,000 tons of waste. (Grossman 146)

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<sup>1</sup> “The power of microprocessor technology doubles and its costs of production fall in half every 18 months.” (Hill)

The sheer volume of this waste is not the only factor that is concerning environmentalists. The chemical contents of e-waste are incredibly hazardous and toxic to people and the environment. “A 2001 EPA report estimated that discarded electronics account for approximately 70 percent of the heavy metals and 40 percent of the lead now found in U.S. landfills” (Grossman 7).

Until recently, programs for managing such waste were nonexistent. It is only in the last few years that printer cartridges have started to include postage-paid envelopes to return spent cartridges to be properly disposed. Apple<sup>2</sup> and other major electronics-based companies have also instituted recycling programs where one could have their old computer picked up and brought to either a needy party such as a school or library or will be brought to a disposal plant capable of handling such waste. Many of the programs developed to help combat overconsumption and therefore overproduction of waste are only at the local level. In Tompkins County, for example, a strict recycling program has been established and is enforced by fines. It goes so far as to even accommodate electronics that are considered hazardous and are illegal to dispose of through household trash<sup>3</sup>. Additionally, steps have been taken at the local level to attempt to discourage the overproduction of garbage by “pricing garbage according to its social marginal costs...An estimated 4000 communities in the United States have started to price garbage directly. (Miranda and Bynum, 1999). These programmes levy a fee on each bag of garbage collected from each household. Garbage collectors can exclude non-payers by utilizing some method of identifying who has paid, such as requiring households to purchase specially marked bags, tags, or stickers” (Fullerton 11). It is quite obvious that given the statistics provided above, the time has come to reassess our material flow into and out of the home and determine an economically, socially, and environmentally viable solution.

In In Defense of Garbage, Judd Alexander argues that one of the prime scapegoats of our trash problem, packaging, is actually the most economically responsible method of transporting goods from producer to consumer. Packaging protects goods from damage during the shipping process, so although it may seem as if there are far too many packing peanuts in your shipment, the cost of those packing peanuts is far less than the cost of replacing the good altogether if less careful means of shipping were employed.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.apple.com/environment/recycling/program/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> 2007 Recycling Guidelines. Ithaca, NY: Tompkins County Solid Waste Management Division, 2007

Similarly, in the food industry, the packaging around fresh produce actually helps to extend shelf life, therefore increasing its value and decreasing the amount of waste before the product even reaches the consumer (Alexander). “Each pound of plastic packaging in municipal waste produced an offsetting reduction in the discard of food waste of 2.4 pounds, and a pound of paper packaging yielded a cut in food discards of 1.6 pounds” (Alexander 72).

Now that the necessity for proper packaging has been established, perhaps it is now time to reevaluate current packaging practices to, instead of regulating their use, renovate or reinvent them to fit into the model of “upcycling”. Upcycling is the practice of retaining high quality “technical nutrients” such as chemicals and plastics and reusing them in a closed-loop industrial cycle (McDonough 110). An example of this process is in Korean rice husks.

Korean rice husks used as packing for stereo components and electronics sent to Europe, then reused there as a material for making bricks... The packing material is nontoxic;... its shipping is inclusive in the freight costs the electronic goods would incur anyway; and the concept of waste is eliminated. (McDonough 110)

If this process were widely adopted and technologies were either created or adapted to benefit from this waste-free cycle, the amount of waste produced by the American consumerist culture would be dramatically reduced. There may be a chance to reverse the effects of the still thriving materialistic, spendthrift mentality of the 1950s.

In addition to upcycling, producers and engineers needs to focus on reversing the mindset that rapid obsolescence is the only route to large profits. Technologies need to be developed that last longer, that use fewer harmful materials, and that can be disposed of through less resource-intensive means. Producers much grow from obsolescence-based business models to an expandability-based model wherein instead of replacing the product entirely, it is developed to allow for the addition of new features rather than completely abandoning the current model for a newer one. Today, Apple has the right idea with their Mac Pro and Polaroid had the right idea in the 1950s (Packard 255). Each of these products has a base that is designed to

outlive a typical obsolescence cycle by allowing for expandability.

Americans today have fallen victim to the consumer economy created for them by the corporations and advertising agents of the 1950s. All of the country's consumer waste issues can be traced back to this time where the notion of rapid obsolescence, patriotic spending, and disposability were first woven into the fabric of the nation's consumer culture. In a short span of time, Americans went from modest, fiscally responsible, utilitarian purchasers to extravagant, style-conscious shoppers who casually accepted the lower quality goods that resulted from the three factors of obsolescence. They quickly adopted the mentality that, in the words of Vance Packard, "there's always room for more" (Packard 29). There are many artifacts from this era that are still evident today and are only now being recognized as potentially harmful. The abundance of availability in today's markets is leading to an abundance of consumption, which, in turn, is leading to an abundance of waste. The only way to curb this is to look to new processes and technologies that will regulate the material flow such that the byproducts of our consumerist ways are no longer directly harming the environment in such a large scale. Interventions need to be developed soon to make the flow of waste one that is cyclical rather than linear. Disposability and obsolescence can no longer be a way of life.

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