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# The Social Construction of E-Waste (Assignments, Readings, Teaching Unit)

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## **ETHICAL CONSUMPTION? SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF E-WASTE UNIT**

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### **SUMMARY AND RATIONALE**

#### ***General framework***

The following unit and assignment form one part of an advanced undergraduate course on Environmental Communication. The course goals include having students apply communication theory to environmental issues, analyze contemporary examples of environmental discourse, and develop communication strategies that support environmental sustainability.

#### ***Course unit***

One unit focuses on having students apply social construction theory to the development of the issue of electronics production and e-waste.

#### ***Innovation***

The unit helps students understand the value of social construction theory for explaining how multiple global actors – including scientists, activists, the news media, government, and industry – have contributed to defining, promoting, and contesting claims about electronics consumption, health, and the environment. This unit includes several staples of Environmental Communication courses, including an introduction to the elements of successful environmental campaigns and patterns in news coverage of the environment. Students also learn about the lifecycle impacts of their computers and cell phones on worker and community health and safety. The electronics issue lends itself well to social construction analysis because of the broad range of actors involved, clear stages of development of the issue, and students' fascination with electronics.

#### ***Teaching materials and assignments***

Readings and lectures introduce students to the theory and research of social construction, campaigns, and environmental news. We apply these theoretical tools to activist and journalistic videos, games, and web-based materials on electronics and sustainability. An activist guest speaker presents his campaign materials and strategies. The unit concludes with a paper assignment that challenges students to evaluate how well two examples of activist media use elements of successful environmental campaigns; to assess how closely these media examples conform with journalistic expectations for newsworthy stories; to compare these examples with the larger social construction of the issue; to make recommendations about how one of the reports could employ campaigning techniques more effectively; and to reflect on how their learning has affected their understanding of environmental issues and could be applied in their final project, which involves students designing campaign materials for a real-world client.

#### ***Syllabus***

5/13 – E-Waste and Social Construction

Read: Hannigan, 32-57

Class: Introduction to social construction; apply social construction to *Exporting Harm* video

5/15 – News Coverage of the Environment

Read: Hannigan, 58-75

Class: Analyze role of news media in framing environmental issues; apply social construction to *60 Minutes* report

5/17 - Constructing Claims about E-waste and Framing News about E-waste

Read: Raphael & Smith, 247-59

Class: Apply Hannigan's tasks in constructing environmental problems (assembling, presenting, contesting claims) and winning environmental claims to e-waste story

5/20 – Guest Speaker: Ted Smith, Founder of Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition and Electronics TakeBack Coalition

Class: Update on global campaigns on electronics

5/22 – Analyzing Claims about E-waste

Read: Paper assignment and media examples you will analyze in your paper

Class: Apply Hannigan's criteria for winning environmental campaigns to e-waste story; discuss how you can apply these criteria in your final project groups.

### ***Readings and Videos***

Basel Action Network (2002). *Exporting harm: The high-tech trashing of Asia*. Seattle: Basel Action Network.

Greenpeace (2005). *Recycling of electronic wastes in China and India: Workplace and environmental contamination*. Retrieved from [http://www.e-takeback.org/press\\_open/greenpeace.pdf](http://www.e-takeback.org/press_open/greenpeace.pdf)

Hannigan, J. A. (1995). *Environmental sociology: A social constructionist perspective*. New York and London: Routledge.

Molleindustria (2010). The phone story game. Retrieved from <http://www.phonestory.org/>

Raphael, C., & Smith, T. (2006). Importing extended producer responsibility for electronic equipment into the United States. In T. Smith, D. A. Sonnenfeld, & D. N. Pellow (Eds.), *Challenging the chip: Labor rights and environmental justice in the global electronics industry* (pp. 247-59). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition/Computer TakeBack Campaign (2003). *Corporate strategies for electronics recycling: A tale of two systems*. Retrieved from [http://svtc.org/wp-content/uploads/prison\\_final.pdf](http://svtc.org/wp-content/uploads/prison_final.pdf)

Sixty Minutes (2009, August 30). *The wasteland*. New York: CBS.

Story of Stuff Project (2010). *The story of electronics*. Retrieved from  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW\\_7i6T\\_H78](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW_7i6T_H78)

## ***Paper Assignment***

### Social Construction of E-waste

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This paper is designed to have you apply the tools of social construction to debates over electronic waste.

**1. Compare and contrast two campaign materials:** Read the Greenpeace report, [Recycling of Electronic Wastes in China and India](#). Compare (the similarities) and contrast (the differences) between the Greenpeace report and any one of the following materials (it's your choice):

- Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition/Computer TakeBack Campaign, [Corporate Strategies for Electronics Recycling: A Tale of Two Systems](#) - (pp. 1-7 and 17-18 only)
- The Story of Stuff Project, "[The Story of Electronics](#)" video
- Molleindustria, "The Phone Story Game" - see [video walk-through here](#), the [full web site here](#), and [download the Android version free here](#) or [for \\$1 here](#).

Focus on discussing the "**elements of winning environmental claims**" identified by Hannigan (pp. 68-70) in each campaign material, including:

- Resonating with existing culture and beliefs
- Articulating claims through established authorities (government, science, etc.)
- Creating social drama (victims, villains, heroes)
- Demonstrating how the issue urgently affects the present, not just the distant future
- Offering a clear agenda for action, problem-solving

Use quotes and analyze visual examples from the two campaign materials to provide evidence of how they draw on each of these elements of winning environmental claims or fail to do so (This section should be at least 3 pages).

**2. Compare with the larger social construction of the issues:** Which two elements of winning campaigns is the Greenpeace report **least** successful at using? Which two elements of winning campaigns is the second campaign material you analyzed **least** successful at using? What are some more effective ways in which the larger e-waste campaign used these winning elements, as described in the Raphael & Smith (2005) reading? Again, use brief quotes and examples to describe how the larger campaign used these elements. (At least 3/4 of a page).

**3. Explain the success of each report:** The Greenpeace report got less news media coverage than the other reports listed here and seems to have led to fewer direct changes. (For example, the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition report helped convince Dell Computer to stop sending its e-waste to prisons for recycling). What might explain the differences in media coverage and results, given the **differences between how the reports use elements of winning**

**environmental claims and how the news media cover environmental issues** (see Hannigan, pp. 58-75 and especially pp. 70-73). (At least 3/4 of a page).

**4. Make recommendations:** Imagine that Greenpeace hired you to consult on how they could improve their report. Suggest specific examples of how the text and visuals of this report might be strengthened to fit Hannigan's elements of winning environmental claims and get more news coverage. (At least 3/4 of a page).

**5. Submit your paper and reflect on your learning:** After completing your paper, write a one page double-spaced response to the following questions:

1. How has this part of the course reinforced or changed your initial environmental views, especially about electronics, the environment, and health?
2. How might your study of social construction and campaigns influence your choices about your final project? What are some specific ideas for how you might use the elements of winning environmental campaigns to reach your target audiences in your project?

**Ground Rules**

**Academic Honesty:** see the information on the Assignments page of our course web site about acceptable and unacceptable forms of collaboration.

**Citing Sources:** Cite your sources in APA style. For a full guide to APA style, see this link.

**Length:** 5-7 pages, double-spaced, 12 point font, with one inch margins all around.

**Grading criteria:**

A to A-	Fulfills all of the following criteria: 1) Excellent understanding of theories (winning environmental claims, how news media cover environment). 2) Excellent understanding of environmental issue (e-waste). 3) Excellent thinking about media examples (Greenpeace report and second material). 4) Clear and accurate writing (including spelling, grammar, punctuation, and ability to cite sources).
B+ to B-	Fulfills most of the criteria for an A paper, except one or more of the following: 1) Significant error in understanding of theories. 2) Significant error in understanding of environmental issue. 3) Significant error in thinking about media examples. 4) Repeated errors in clarity and accuracy of writing (including spelling, grammar, punctuation, and ability to cite sources).
C+ to C-	Fulfills some of the criteria for an A paper, except two or more of the following: 1) Significant error in understanding of theories. 2) Significant error in understanding of environmental issue.

	<p>3) Significant error in thinking about media examples.</p> <p>4) Repeated errors in clarity and accuracy of writing (including spelling, grammar, punctuation, and ability to cite sources).</p>
D to F	<p>Is characterized by any of the following:</p> <p>1) Does not address all of the questions on the paper assignment.</p> <p>2) Shows little or no evidence of understanding theories.</p> <p>3) Provides no evidence from media examples.</p> <p>4) Violates academic integrity, including using material from any other source without citing it.</p>

### ***Reaction of Students and Teacher***

I've revised this assignment over the past decade, substituting new media examples for students to analyze. The Greenpeace report is a useful touchstone because it fulfills some of the elements of successful campaigns well and others not so well. It especially helps Environmental Science and Environmental Studies majors think about how to translate research for the news media and the public. It might also be interesting to have students compare an activist report with a news story about the report to see which activist messages get through the media filter and which do not. To localize the issue, teachers could invite someone from their school's Information Technology, Facilities, or Sustainability departments to discuss their electronics purchasing criteria and recycling or disposal methods, especially with an eye toward how the school might incorporate environmental and health concerns into their policies.

In the reflective journals they write after completing the paper students comment that this module opens their eyes to the health and social justice issues raised by the electronics they use every day, even if they have some familiarity with the topic from news reports or other course work. Most students are also able to apply the elements of successful campaigns to their own final projects in the course, which involve designing their own environmental campaigns. In particular, students begin to think more specifically about how they can move from providing information to telling more dramatic, urgent stories that can compel their target audiences' attention to an issue, while also drawing on scientific research to support their claims.

### ***Biography***

[Chad Raphael](#) is Associate Professor of Communication at Santa Clara University. He teaches courses on Environmental Communication, Technology and Communication, and Media for Civic Education and Engagement. His current research focuses on public deliberation and engagement, the design of new media for civic learning and action, and the electronics industry's impact on environment, health, and labor.