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Will Liam save us?

An analysis of Apple's zero-waste goals and waste networks associated with the MacBook.

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Abstract

As popular awareness of global environmental crises rises, the circular economy model is increasingly heralded as a means to address the environmental impact of traditional extractive economies. Technology provider Apple has been among high-profile corporations quick to adopt a circular model, announcing their plans to both end mining and become zero-waste. In this thesis, I analyse Apple's zero-waste plans using my own notebook as a case study. A discourse analysis of the company's *2017 Environmental Responsibility Report* reveals that the zero-waste approach is (at least in part) a marketing strategy. It works to increase Apple's power and consumer base. The zero-waste strategy is presented as distinct from their social responsibility, echoing the way that waste is conceptualised within the circular economy. Both Apple's zero-waste plan and the circular economy rely heavily on technological innovation to offer solutions to waste. Waste is understood as something distinct from, and entirely controllable by, human intention.

Individual case studies of my notebooks aluminium casing and hard disk drive demonstrate that vast waste networks of human and nonhuman actors enable Apple to function as they do, and are in fact integral to any economy organised around the pursuit of profit. Within this context, attempts to circumvent the worst harms associated with the extraction, production, consumption, and disposal contexts of ICT equipment will end up reinscribing or reinforcing wasteful practices. Through an auto-ethnographic description of dealing with the notebooks possibly failing battery, I argue that understanding ourselves as separate from waste networks (as zero-waste discourses encourage us to do) similarly forecloses the possibility of disrupting the most negative impacts of waste. Repair tentatively emerges as one way of destabilising the power of large corporations that benefit from capital such as Apple. Ultimately, the case studies presented here raise serious doubts about both Apple's zero-waste strategy and the circular economy in general.

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