

Seeing the Forest for the Trees: Paper versus Electronic Newsletters

By Joan Johnson

There has been a lot of discussion lately in peace and justice communities about confining communications to the exclusive use of electronics as a way to save the environment, specifically in regard to newsletter output. From a personal point of view, after working my computer-bound clinic job, I want an easy chair, cup of tea and my Veterans for Peace, Women Against Military Madness or other important newsletters in hand. The last thing I want to do is stare at another bright eye-straining screen to catch up on the news that really matters to me. After reading my paper copies of newsletters, I can easily share them with family, friends, neighbors and co-workers, highlight important articles, and write notes in the margins. By mailing them to others--and having them mailed to me--I am supporting the ever-diminishing U.S. Postal Service's business and postal workers' unions, now under attack by lawmakers.

I do not deny that computers and computer-generated communication are a big part of my life, both personally and professionally. I also recognize that the peace and social justice groups with which I affiliate depend on electronic communications. But what I question is this new "environmental" mantra being repeated over and over which claims that electronic newsletters are "more green" or "more sustainable" than paper newsletters. I believe that we are fooling ourselves with this way of thinking.

When we read the electronic version of a newsletter, the computer and screen are powered by electricity, which is in no way "green." Tremendous amounts of energy are needed for cooling computers to keep them running. Our electronic newsletter information is stored in data banks. In "Power, Pollution and the Internet" (New York Times 9/23/2012), James Glanz wrote, "Worldwide, the digital warehouses use about 30 billion watts of electricity, roughly equivalent to the output of 30 nuclear power plants, according to estimates industry experts compiled for The Times. Data centers in the United States account for one-quarter to one-third of that load, the estimates show." That is a huge environmental price to pay for data storage.



Photo: Upper Midwest Regional Earth Sciences Application Center

The destruction of forests is often cited as a reason to make the switch to exclusively electronic news, but sustainable forests grow renewable biomass, and what are electronics doing to the environment? In Don Carli's "Media Shift" presentation on PBS (March 31, 2010), he stated, "Computers, cellular networks and data centers are connected to the destruction of over 600 square miles of U.S. forest." He says that one of the biggest causes is mountaintop removal in coal mining—a major cause of deforestation, biodiversity loss, and the pollution of over 1,200 miles of headwater streams in the U.S. He found that the electricity flowing through our digital media devices and their servers is linked to mountaintop removal of coal from the Appalachian Mountains. And the resulting air pollution and acid rain from these coal-powered plants is extremely detrimental to the land, air, and water.

Speaking of clean water—our earth's precious resource which is rapidly becoming more scarce, and over which wars are being waged—it is important to recognize that the production of one computer chip uses hideous amounts of water. In his book, *The Big Thirst: The Secret Life and Turbulent Future of Water*, Charles Fishman explains how two million gallons of clean water are used in one day at just one computer chip plant (IBM in Burlington, Vermont), and reminds us that there are dozens of chip-manufacturing plants around the world. Computers are comprised of many toxic substances as well, and National Geographic (May 18, 2013) reports that "according to the U.N., about 20 to 50 million tons of electronic components are discarded each year, and laptops are becoming an increasing part of this refuse mixture."

The Environmental Protection Agency reported that "Americans recycled nearly 66 percent of the paper they used in 2011. Recycling reduces greenhouse gas emissions, conserves natural resources, and saves landfill space. According to the American Forest and Paper Association, nearly 80 percent of America's paper mills

are designed to use paper collected in recycling programs, and they depend on paper recycling to supply the raw materials they need to make new paper.”

While I recognize the importance of using paper, a renewable resource, I am also aware of the energy use, environmental degradation, and pollution caused by its production. In researching this topic, I have undergone a massive self-evaluation on both computer/data-base usage and paper usage, and am finding ways to “curb my diet” in these realms. I believe that we each need to do our part to limit consumption wherever possible and always be in a “recycling/re-use” mode with both modalities of communication. But I still believe that paper newsletters are an extremely important way to get our peace message out to each other and to the community at large. When examining all aspects of the “paper vs. electronic newsletter” argument in its entirety (from start to finish), contrary to popular opinion, I do not subscribe to the mantra of electronic being “more green.” In our paper newsletters, as well as in our daily lives, can we make it a goal to use recycled paper and/or (preferably) Forest Stewardship Council Certified paper. (I understand that WAMM has already made this commitment.)

It’s also important to realize that the military is the world’s worst polluter, and I think that all of the paper newsletters of every peace and social justice community of the entire world probably wouldn’t account for running a Trident submarine or an aircraft carrier for a couple of hours. If we can effectively and efficiently spread more of our message against military domination and destruction on more coffee tables, then I am for it.

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