Week 13
Reading Presentation

Internet Geographies Spring 2023

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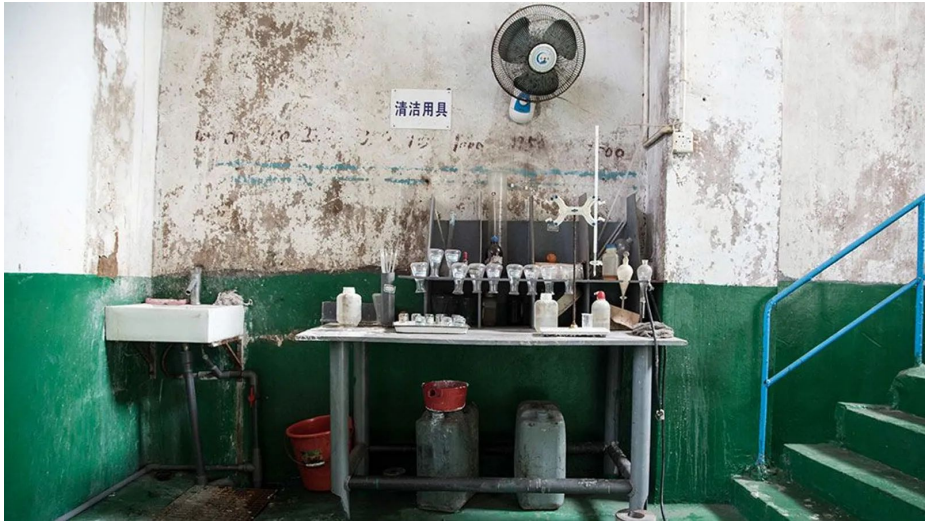
Monday, April 24,, 2022

Professor Morgan Mueller

Tim Maughan, "The Dystopian Lake Filled By the World's Tech Lust", 2015

Key points/Summary

- Maughan described the catastrophic impact of mining and production of rare earth metals on Baotou, the largest industrial city in Inner Mongolia.
- Using descriptive texts and photographs, Maughan illustrated a clear image of the destructive impact of rare earth minings in not only Baotou, the mines and frontiers around the world.
- Using the extraction of neodymium and cerium as example, Maughan discussed about the production process and the waste byproducts.
- The rows of pipes that burst out from the ground, the coal and other minerals dust that cover the sky, the makeshift buildings that face the danger of falling apart at any second, the toxic smells of chemical substances that lingers in the air, and much more have turned the once beautify natural land into industrial landscapes that are unaware by a lot of people.



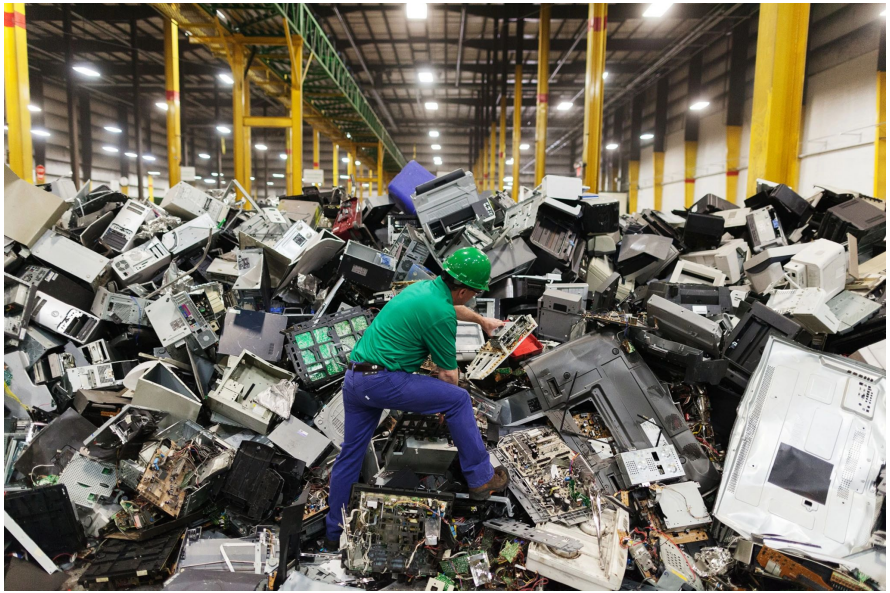
“It’s a truly alien environment, dystopian and horrifying,” described by Maughan as he refers to a photograph that showed the black-dusted ground with sluggish liquids washing up and the row of processing plants and buildings that were blurred by the poisonous dust and substances in the air released by themselves.

The “Inside a rare earth mineral processing plant” photograph was used to show the interior of the processing plant. However, one thing that Maughan missed and didn’t talk about was the poster/sign that was pinned on the wall next to the fan. The poster wrote: “清洁用具,” which translates to “cleaning/sanitizing utensils.” which is referring to the sink, bottles, and flasks underneath that are in, ironically, a very dirty and unsanitized condition.

Josh Lepawsky, "What E-Waste Journalism Gets Wrong"

Key points/Summary

- Reporting focuses just on discarded devices/waste dumping rather than the waste involved in electronic production
- Often inaccurate or incomplete information
  - Shipping misconceptions
  - Incorrect tracker data
  - Neglects legal restrictions



National Geographic: Each U.S. Family Trashes 400 iPhones' Worth of E-Waste a Year

“Most e-waste stories, intentionally or otherwise, reinforce the idea that individual consumer responsibility is where the action ought to be. However, when it comes to electronics, consumers can buy things like cellphones and choose from a myriad array of makes, models, and features. But the conditions under which those electronics are made, the amalgams of toxicants they contain, and the scale of waste and pollutants arising during raw material extraction and manufacturing are so similar and so vast as to make the idea of ‘consumer choice’ basically meaningless as a waste prevention strategy.”

Questions/Next Step

- What responsibility do technology companies and consumers have regarding the environmental damage caused by the production of rare earth metals?
- How can we balance the demand for electronics with the need to protect the environment and the health of local communities?
- Do individuals have any responsibility regarding e-waste? Is there anything individuals can do to help?
- Do our systems (planned obsolescence, lack of right to repair, etc) create more e-waste?