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The Price of the Popular Media Is Paid by the Effluent Citizen

TOBY MILLER

An important shared interest of disability studies and media studies is the materiality of media and its consequences for differently situated subjects. Toby Miller examines both ends of the production cycle of media technologies—manufacture and disposal—to demonstrate the interconnected ways that they are physically, economically, environmentally, and politically disabling. He reveals how these modes of disablement collectively produce the liminal status of “effluent citizenship” for poor and despised laborers on the fringes of the global economy upon whom the popular media depend.

Who pays the price of the popular media, and how does it relate to disability? And what is an effluent citizen?

I shall put some of these terms under erasure as contingent and debatable, then argue that we need to turn away—for a moment, not forever—from such important issues as the production, representation, and reception of screen texts and their implications for disabled people, and toward the production of disability in the very manufacture and recycling of media technologies themselves. My case study will be Mexico’s formal and informal labor force.

Disability and Price

The United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities defines “persons with disabilities” as people with “long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.”¹ The Convention

provides a useful starting point because it allows for disability's shifts and shocks as a social construction. We should add the constitutive role of corporate, governmental, cultural, and interpersonal ignorance and prejudice in creating and negating "disability" as part of biopower's hyper-investment in conventionally productive and reproductive bodies.

The relevant categories are of course historically, geographically, politically, theoretically, and empirically contingent, as is being able-bodied.² And activism has been central to altering the relevant definitions, debates, and policies. For example, anti-eugenics disability civil rights movements have challenged conventional discourses.³ And while medical researchers engage supposed links between, for example, autism and the media in the language of illness, activists and progressive scholars argue that it should instead be regarded as a disability, or embrace "neurodiversity" as a means of understanding differences without denigrating them.⁴

So how does this connect to pricing?

In his problematization of supply and demand as the principal determinations of the price and value of goods and services, Amartya Sen says that a disabled person may have "the same demand function over commodity bundles" as an able-bodied one without deriving the same utility from them, because they have particular needs. As a consequence, setting prices through these mechanisms and ignoring different subjectivities means we all pay the same amount but get different qualities of experience in return. The capacity to increase income or transform it into social power through consumption, for example investment in human capital, may be similarly unequal.⁵

This argument lies at the heart of Sen's support for focusing social policy not just on inequalities derived from wealth and income, but capability as well.⁶ Such a focus is sometimes taken to imply that the disabled cannot lead pleasurable, autotelic lives—but that is not Sen's view. Rather, he is saying that the resources required for self-actualization may be greater and more diverse for the disabled than others.⁷ And it is clear that social policy enabling access to those resources does not happen in the media sphere.

Disability and the Media

"Medium," the singular form of the word "media," has been in English usage since the seventeenth century. It refers to something that lies

between two objects and links them. With that in mind, I use the term “media” to cover a multitude of cultural and communicative machines and processes that connect people, processes, institutions, meanings, and power in the material world, but with a particular emphasis on film and television drama.

Like disability, media definitions are very contingent—for instance, why are the BBC and Russia Today/RT *not* “social media,” when their news reports are discussed by millions of people; but a solitary web page attacking feminism and read by no one *is* “social media”? We supposedly occupy an epoch that sees *La fin de la télévision* (*The End of Television*)⁸ and we are routinely told that *La televisión ha muerto* (*Television Is Dead*).⁹ But such claims are empirically empty. Worldwide, the number of subscribers to television via satellite and cable increased 8% to eight hundred million in 2012.¹⁰ In 2013, the average Briton watched about four hours of linear television a day on a TV set, and just three and a half minutes on tablets, smartphones, and laptops.¹¹ Indian residents are likelier to own television sets than have access to indoor plumbing, and politicians devote their advertising money to television ahead of all other options. The number of Indian TV households grew by eleven million in 2012.¹² In Mexico, as digital media proliferate, so does TV. It is the dominant medium, and if anything increasingly so.¹³ In Australia, “all age groups continue to spend the majority of their screen time with the in-home TV set.”¹⁴ And the first five months of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign saw almost three million commercials on cable TV alone, an increase of a million from four years earlier.¹⁵

From a textual perspective, specifically a metaphorical one, disabled people pay a heavy symbolic price in the media for their social status. The history of cinema discloses that from the earliest moving pictures, disabled bodies were objects of stigmatization and even derisive laughter.¹⁶ These bodies remain subject to the scopophilic gaze, a psychoanalytic term used in film theory to explain the pleasure spectators may feel at watching people on screen who cannot see them—in pornography, for example.¹⁷ But one could also think of pornography as a valued aid to sexual self-expression for the paying disabled, who meet a price in search of pleasure.¹⁸

On television, it is a quarter century since the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People issued guidelines for producers on rep-

resenting disabled people. They were based on intense dissatisfaction, wide consultation, and a review of relevant literature.¹⁹ But recent studies of disability and TV, focused with equal vigor on production, text, and reception, clarify that little has changed.²⁰ In 2015–16, U.S. prime-time TV drama's percentage of regular characters living with disabilities dropped from 1.4% the previous year to 0.9%, even though 12% of the U.S. population is disabled.²¹

Occasionally, a television series emerges that is hailed for focusing on disability as simultaneously normal, manageable, shocking, and traumatic, such as *Push Girls* (Sundance, 2012–present); but this is uncommon. Eugenic views continue to haunt Hollywood, as seen in protests regarding the film *Me before You* (Thea Sharrock, 2016),²² and the few dramatic roles that involve disability are frequently cast with able-bodied actors.²³ The desire for more integration into storylines of both factual and fictional media texts remains strong among the disabled.²⁴

This is very much in keeping with the discourse of misrepresentation and exclusion that runs through civil-rights arguments about media texts. It is a powerful position that can attain commercial, state, and media responses due to its basis in popular democracy and understanding of how to lobby and embarrass. This narrative of inclusiveness has circulated in debates about the media and disability in the United States since at least the early days of radio.

But it can also be articulated to the governmentalization of the everyday and the radical as a counter to disabled activists' fundamental critiques of the bourgeois media through their incorporation in a Faustian bargain that ensures interpellation but leaves prevailing power relations intact.²⁵ Talent agencies may now have diversity departments that specialize in casting disabled people²⁶ and Hollywood unions offer some research and services;²⁷ but it is an unequal exchange when disabled people pay for the media as consumers just like everyone else, yet are either ignored or exploited by them as social subjects.

Adopting a more medical model of disability, some scholars look at the price of the interaction between the media and disabled people in a different way, contending that popular culture has deleterious effects on mental functioning and bodily fitness.²⁸ There is a lengthy history of parents, doctors, psy-function²⁹ experts, officials, politicians, and community groups expressing concern about the impact of the media on

developmental problems, behavioral conditions, and so on, and linking these to disability—as far back as the nineteenth century, neurological experts attributed their increased business to telegraphy, alongside the expansion of steam, periodical literature, science, and education for women.³⁰ Despite several decades of scholarship and activism, such positions remain prevalent in contemporary discourse about people with disabilities.

What of the newer media, as opposed to these venerable and middle-aged forms? Aren't they supposed to demolish barriers and end the confinement of social groups? Perhaps, but at a price. At a policy level, in the U.S. for example, services such as closed captioning and deafness are frequently associated with private endeavor and hence understood to articulate to consumption and telecoms policy, diminishing their standing under civil-rights legislation.³¹ And the supposed capacity of the internet to break through cultural gatekeepers and permit unfiltered expression can easily lead to the attempted humiliation and commodification of disabled people via extraordinarily abusive rants.³²

Of course, in their replication of letters to the editor, the newer media can provide a means of talking back to the bourgeois media and potentially forming a variety of counter-public spheres where disabled people and other excluded or stereotyped groups can speak, unite, disunite, exchange, disengage, and so on, instead of being fixed in place as isolated and disgruntled spectators.³³ But disabled people are among the many disadvantaged groups with less access to the internet than is the norm.³⁴ This dilemma inevitably directs us to questions of citizenship rights.

Effluent Citizenship

The last two hundred years of modernity have produced three zones of citizenship, with partially overlapping but also distinct historicities. These zones are the political (conferring the right to reside and vote); the economic (the right to work and prosper); and the cultural (the right to know and speak). They correspond to the French Revolutionary cry "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" (liberty, equality, solidarity) and the Argentine left's contemporary version "*ser ciudadano, tener trabajo, y ser alfabetizado*" (citizenship, employment, and literacy). The first category concerns political rights; the second, material interests; and the third,

cultural representation. Running across these are calls for ecological or environmental citizenship.³⁵

I suggest we use “*effluent citizenship*” as a further category—an unfortunate one on the surface, unlike those above, as “effluent” means waste or sewage. I stumbled across it as what I assume is a typographical error made by Taylor and Francis, the publisher of an article I consulted for this chapter.³⁶ It got me thinking about the specific rights of those working with and as the *detritus* of society. It articulates to my earlier remark about the role of corporate, governmental, cultural, and interpersonal ignorance and prejudice in creating and negating “disability” as part of biopower’s hyper-investment in conventionally productive and reproductive bodies. This effluent citizenship specifically applies to the search for rights by those who dispose of media trash, but I suggest we can also apply it to those working under abject but factory conditions in the more formal economy of media manufacturing.

In pre-industrial European towns, the anxious rich condemned the “odor of crowded bodies” and a “rising tide of excrement and rubbish.” Raggpickers typified urban untouchables: “sewermen, gut dressers, knackers, drain cleaners, workers in refuse dumps, and dredging gangs.”³⁷ Removal meant the *displacement* of waste, but not its *elimination*. As a living, malodorous reminder of urban filth, the lowly raggpicker foiled bourgeois fantasies of cleanliness that depended on “escape from and rejection of a primitive agricultural system now in a state of crisis.”³⁸

In the electronic waste (e-waste) era, raggpickers are statistical and managerial problems in terms of public health, income, self-sufficiency, and so on. They are effluent citizens. Indian raggpickers, who number in the hundreds of thousands, suffer a historically unprecedented prevalence of low hemoglobin, high monocyte and eosinophil counts, gum disease, diarrhea, and dermatitis.³⁹ In Brazil, where it is estimated that there are half a million raggpickers, extraordinary levels of physiological disorders and psychological distress are reported. Epidemiological studies frequently find raggpickers at fault for polluting their environments, and seek to outlaw them.⁴⁰

I am concerned here, then, with how the media cause disability—not through consciousness/media effects, but as part of their real, material practice, linked to the creation of electronic technologies and their post-consumer lives. My site is Mexican workers in both the formal sector

(who manufacture media gadgetry) and the informal sector (who recycle it). The vast majority of the world's six hundred million disabled people live in the Global South and are also among the likeliest to develop disabilities due to injuries at work.⁴¹

I focus below not on the monetary, metaphorical, or medical cost paid by consumers of media technologies and texts, but the price in terms of physical health paid by the workers who manufacture and recycle the devices that consumers are forever upgrading in order to augment their pleasure and performance. Many people laboring in the *maquiladoras* of northwestern Mexico, whether in the formal or informal sectors, suffer remarkable physical harm that materially affects their capabilities as per Sen's account.

Mexico

When a *bracero* (guest-worker) program with the U.S. ended in the mid-1960s, the Mexican state introduced import-tax exemptions to attract external manufacturing, and Washington permitted duty-free return of components that had originated north of the border and were assembled south of it. Mexican *maquiladoras*—factories owned by foreign (especially U.S.) companies producing goods for reimportation into those countries—opened their doors. What began as a temporary initiative became of massive economic significance during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1993, *maquiladora* exports amounted to U.S. \$21.9 billion; in 2000, the figure was U.S. \$79.5 billion. The *maquiladoras*' proportion of Mexico's overall exports grew from 37.8% in 1995 to 47.1% in 2006, when they employed upwards of 1.2 million people, a labor force generated through the migration of poor rural people to the north. There was no equivalent growth in social services, education, public health, housing, or water supplies.⁴²

The North American Free Trade Agreement/*Tratado de Libre Comercio* (NAFTA/TLC) became a key instrument of this exploitation. Since the treaty's adoption, trade between the U.S. and Mexico has grown without a comparable redistribution of wealth or economic development. Mexico boasts over eight hundred electronics manufacturers, employing over six hundred thousand people. They are paid lower wages than their counterparts in Nepal and China.⁴³ The U.S.-Mexico frontier is characterized by "greater income disparity . . . than at any other major commercial border in the world."⁴⁴

Women have long been at the forefront of the *maquiladoras*' electronic-labor process and its impact on health and disability. For instance, when RCA moved its radio and TV plants from Bloomington to Ciudad Juárez in search of cheaper costs, company elders sought a workforce of young, unmarried women.⁴⁵ The gendered nature of this employment has been accompanied by violence. Human Rights Watch disclosed the numerous misogynistic assaults and discrimination in *maquiladoras* in 1996. Matters have hardly improved. The Centre for Reflection and Action on Labour Issues (CEREAL) interviewed thousands of workers in 2008 and 2009 across the Mexican electronics sector, disclosing systematic sexual harassment and fundamental exploitation; one reads telling stories of each female employee preparing over a hundred central-processing units an hour in factories. They are classified as “temporary” so that employers can elude regulations and deals that govern full-time labor. Their occupational health and safety are jeopardized, just as their labor is discounted.⁴⁶

Maquiladora warehouses, managers, and researchers are generally based in San Diego. Components are imported to Mexico from there, Germany, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Thailand. Put another way, the dangerous, dull, and poorly remunerated work is done across the border. In response, vigorous civil-society groups remind authorities of their responsibilities and encourage direct citizen activism, notably Las Voces de la Maquila,⁴⁷ the Colectivo Chilpancingo Pro Justicia Ambiental,⁴⁸ the Environmental Health Coalition,⁴⁹ and Greenpeace.⁵⁰

Mainstream economic analyses of these industries focus on foreign direct investment, local employment, and technology transfer, largely ignoring pollution, exploitation, and gender relations.⁵¹ An example is the *New York Times* headlining TV-set manufacture as “A Boom across the Border.”⁵² For such approaches, “*maquiladora* diseases . . . that bloom in wombs and spinal columns”⁵³ are no doubt negative externalities, to be considered—if at all—in a calculus of Paretian optimality and the most “efficient” allocation of resources.

Of course, manufacturing television sets is only one part of Mexico's electronics production. Hewlett Packard, Hitachi, IBM, Nokia, Siemens, Phillips, and Motorola all have businesses there, not to mention such subcontractors as Foxconn, Solectron, Flextronics, and Jabil Circuits.⁵⁴ This abject situation has not been simply accepted by workers:

As workers and communities outside of Silicon Valley began to discover this “dark side of the chip,” they also began to come together to confront its “clean” image. Community and worker based movements began to emerge in other countries—PHASE II in Scotland, Asia Monitor Resource Centre in Hong Kong, TAVOI in Taiwan, CEREAL in Mexico, etc. as the grassroots efforts began to grow into a global movement. Many of these groups are now working together internationally through various networks to develop worker training on occupational health and safety, to clean up and prevent air and water pollution, to press the electronics industry to phase out use of the most toxic chemicals.⁵⁵

The National Coalition of Electronic Industry Workers, declares that five years after the publication of the Electronic Industry Code of Conduct: the same companies that signed the Code are the ones violating the human labor rights. The Code states (part A-7) that the signing companies should respect the workers’ freedom of association. This right, in our Federal Labor Law, is constantly violated. We recall two recent cases. The first one: the dismissal of more than 10 workers of Flextronics, only because they demanded transparency on the issue of profit shares. The second case was the dismissal of Aureliano Rosas Suárez, Omar Manuel Montes Estrada [and] Vicente de Jesús Rodríguez Roa, sacked because they demanded their right to have their wages leveled. They also worked for the company Flextronics. We inform the International Electronic Industry that the members of the National Coalition of Electronic Industry Workers will continue to use this mask as a symbol of our repression. But the coalition will continue demanding and defending our human labor rights.⁵⁶

The second quotation above comes from a group of masked activists who protest against these labor conditions. Their identities are kept secret in order to protect their employment, their friends, and their relatives. The anonymous protestors have made periodic media appearances since 2007. They offer a civil-society voice that is organic to current and former workers on the line (unions exist, but are basically inactive or corporate). They represent affluent citizenship.

And the environment? The 1984 La Paz Agreement on Cooperation for the Protection and Improvement of the Environment in the Border Area/*Convenio entre los Estados Unidos Mexicanos y los Estados Uni-*

dos de América sobre Cooperación para la Protección y Mejoramiento del Medio Ambiente between Mexico and the U.S. mandates that *maquiladora* waste return to where the relevant multinational corporation is domiciled.⁵⁷ Despite that accord, and NAFTA/TLC's environmental and labor protections, the *maquilas* have ushered in and maintained low wages, labor-law violations, and exposure to unhealthy chemicals and gases—a toxic life in every sense. Enforcement has been lax, and statistics about the environmental side effects of production and the flow of contaminated goods are spotty (the anecdotal evidence is appalling). Domestic manufacturing is similarly scandalous in the pollution of air, water, and soil, which leads to disability across industrialized population centers. The constitutive racialization of Republican Party electoral tactics routinely dogs the prospects for effective bilateral governance in the collective interests of public health.⁵⁸

The 1992 Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal prohibits international transportation of hazardous material, even between non-signatories of the accord (the U.S.) and signatories (Mexico).⁵⁹ But powerful polluters like Japan, Canada, and the U.S. engage in “venue shopping,” seeking out dumping grounds wherever feasible. They justify such actions on a neoliberal basis, invoking the doctrines of comparative advantage and the notion that every nation has a certain amount of e-waste it can bear. California alone shipped about twenty million pounds of e-waste in 2006 to various nations, including Mexico.⁶⁰ The U.S. is notorious for dispatching old batteries across the border, where clinical reports of the impact on children's development are chilling.⁶¹

Such waste is one of the biggest sources of heavy metals and toxic pollutants. It causes grave environmental and health concerns, stemming from the potential seepage of noxious chemicals, gases, and metals into landfills, water sources, and salvage yards. Mexico has some of the most advanced technology in the world for recycling computer monitors and television sets,⁶² but profit margins are greater when unsafe methods are used in the informal sector.

Before the Spanish invasion, Mexico had many *pepenadores*—people who managed waste. Their policies and practices were disrupted by the conquest, which saw more and more urban dross accumulate over three centuries as commodification took hold and put an end to rural

recycling norms.⁶³ Today, much e-waste recycling is done by pre-teen girls, ragpickers who work without protection to pull apart outmoded First World televisions and computers. The remains are dumped in landfills.

So a vicious cycle ensues, whereby workers in the conventional economy in a place like Mexico make the devices, fall ill, and become disabled; then after the media are deemed surplus to requirements in the U.S. and elsewhere, they are exported back to Mexico, where workers in the informal economy recycle them, fall ill, and become disabled.⁶⁴ The disposal of solid waste such as electronic equipment is responsible for over 8% of the country's greenhouse-gas emissions.⁶⁵

The effluent citizens who deal with this waste are as liminal as the border itself. Like other global fringe-dwellers who have circled both modernity and postmodernity, they are crucial yet often invisible contributors to material and mythological life. Ironically, itinerant ragpickers are hardy perennials, supplying raw materials to cultural industries from Gutenberg to the internet. Perhaps 1% of people in the Global South live this way—approximately fifteen million worldwide.⁶⁶

Mexican e-waste ragpickers are frequently former employees or family members of *maquiladora* workers. They operate beyond taxation, labor laws, and police, collecting, separating, cataloguing, and selling materials from spurned consumer and business products that have made their way to rubbish dumps and low-income areas. Most ragpickers do not earn wages from employers, nor are they in registered co-operatives or small businesses. As we have seen, this lack of workers' rights also characterizes the *maquiladoras*, which use temporary-employment agencies to hire people who are never deemed full-time.⁶⁷

Like others laboring in the informal sector, they suffer three kinds of occupational harm: primary emissions expose them to dangerous substances in the objects they are recycling, such as mercury, arsenic, and lead; secondary emissions see dioxins forming during incinerations; and tertiary ones emerge when the precious metals that ragpickers seek are extracted through poisonous reagents, such as cyanide, which are left exposed in the open air. The results change the bodies and life chances of very poor, very young people forever, altering their very DNA, hormones, fertility, breathing, and other functions.⁶⁸ Ragpickers have the lowest life expectancy in Mexico⁶⁹ and labor for little—an average of

U.S. \$2,500 a year.⁷⁰ And the young ragpickers exposed to e-waste frequently lack information about the dangers confronting them.⁷¹

In 2012, the Mexican state introduced reforms to transfer people from the informal to the formal sectors of the economy.⁷² There are classically three reasons for doing this. From the government's point of view, it increases tax revenue and spreads the tax base. In terms of social services, it permits a better accounting for the who, what, when, where, and how of the nation. For workers, it can mean both greater regulation and greater protection—less freedom and flexibility, but more rights and entitlements. It is putatively designed to boost government revenues and regularize salaries and conditions. Perversely, such “reform” is really designed to disempower trade unions and make the employees they cover into flexible workers as per those in the informal sector.⁷³

In addition, local public policy frequently exacerbates ragpickers' lives by mandating that they forge perverse alliances with exploitative middle-“man” brokers, even as they remain outside the law: the Mexican case saw quasi-formalization of the informal sector under the *clientelismo* of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, which ran national and rural politics for decades through a mixture of electoral popularity, corruption, and international networks.⁷⁴

The wider background to this story is structural adjustment as peddled by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the sovereign states that dominate them. This neoliberal clerisy encourages the Global South to turn away from subsistence agriculture and toward tradable goods. This neoliberalism has urged, and capitalism has driven, chaotic urban growth. The result is an informal working class that is generally disarticulated from political activity and non-government organizations, because it lacks monetary and cultural capital and organizational heft. Not surprisingly, the World Bank and its kind show no interest in actually engaging ragpickers: they want to transform them from a distance. The same applies to orthodox waste-management systems.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Several options for regulating multinational corporations and the challenges they pose trans-territorially for citizen action present themselves

as responses to the situation I have described: “soft law [protocols of international organizations], hard law [nationally based legislation], codes of conduct [transnational norms], and voluntary self-regulation” (ho ho ho).⁷⁶ But critical research argues that these strategies have so far failed to secure a nexus between “the transfer of technology” and the transfer of “practices for using it safely.”⁷⁷ That outcome would necessitate universal standards of health and safety across sites, from the post-industrial core to the manufacturing periphery, in addition to contractual deals between multinationals and their hosts.⁷⁸ Guidance must come from a blend of political, economic, and cultural citizenship into effluent citizenship, recognizing those who are left out of even progressive narratives. We need to respond to this situation by connecting the materiality of media technologies to the production of disability. Our research should be as nimble as capital itself, so that we can juggle political economy, ethnography, and textual analysis and work with the relevant parties in order to set an agenda and fulfill it.

NOTES

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- 2 Asch and Fine, *Women with Disabilities*; Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*; Linton, *Claiming Disability*.
- 3 Rose and Rose, “The Changing Face of Human Nature.”
- 4 Hacking, “Kinds of People.” On “neurodiversity,” see Oren, this volume.
- 5 Sen, *Development as Freedom*: 69, 88, 119.
- 6 Sen, *The Idea of Justice*: 253.
- 7 Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life*: 84–85; Angeloni, “Integrated Disability Management.”
- 8 Missika, *La fin de la télévision*.
- 9 De Silva, *La televisión ha muerto*.
- 10 Wayne Friedman, “Worldwide Pay TV on the Rise, Big Growth in Asia,” *MediaPost*, May 23, 2013, www.mediapost.com.
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- 20 Barton, "Disability and Television."
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