

# Mining our waste



K.PANGETER-FREEMK

Late last year my wireless printer at home broke down. It needed a new printer head. Other than that, everything else with the printer still worked well. But, given the pandemic, and its impact on global production of electronic parts, it took the service center almost eight months to get the necessary part in. And this was for a repair job — head replacement — that took only a few hours to complete.

## STATIC MARVIN TORT

The front-load washer's door came off after the lock and the hinge broke. To date, there are no parts available for the thing. "Repair" is not exactly an option as the aluminum cast hinge broke into several pieces. All I need is the hinge, as the rest of the door — and the washer — is perfectly fine. Without the door, however, any front-load washer is practically useless.

I almost gave up on that wireless printer, having bought a cheaper wired replacement months ago as it was needed for work and school. But I felt it would have been a waste to simply throw the thing away. After all, it wasn't some cheap appliance at the time it was bought. Luckily, I chose to wait it out. Had I chucked that wireless printer, I may not have bothered to look for a recycling place for it. And, it would have simply gone out with the garbage.

I had some luck with the printer, although the wait was eight months. Will I have the same luck with the washer? Nobody knows, at this point. The thing is, for want of a single component, an entire appliance can be deemed broken and useless, and may actually end up going out with the garbage. On a daily basis, I can only wonder how many junked electric appliances and electronic devices ended up in dumps. Add to these junked cars, used batteries, and broken wind turbine blades and broken solar panels. Even renewable energy sources produce waste.

I am sure that in the last two years or so, I am not the only consumer that has had to deal with broken electric appliances or electronic devices in need of repair, with replacement parts or components difficult to source. I am also sure that unlike me, a number of these consumers had opted to actually throw away whatever consumer durable that was, and instead bought cheaper replacements. And I mean cheaper as in disposable.

In June 2019, *Time Magazine* published a story titled, "The World Has an E-Waste Problem," written by Alana Semuels. The story noted that, 1.) less than a quarter of all US electronic waste is recycled, according to a United Nations estimate; and, 2.) the rest

is incinerated or ends up in landfills. "That's bad news, as e-waste can contain harmful materials like mercury and beryllium that pose environmental risks," Semuels wrote.

She added, "Even when e-waste rules exist, it's left up to consumers to handle their old devices properly. But recycling them can be a pain... Many consumers, paralyzed by the hassle or put off by the expense, simply throw their devices into the trash or stash them in a drawer, hoping they'll just disappear."

In my opinion, it is when people simply throw away these things that e-waste becomes truly problematic. As I noted in a previous column, as battery technology improves, and battery use ramps up as the world turns to electric from fossil fuel, who will handle battery disposal or battery recycling? The shift to electric cars will eventually lead to a crisis in disposal unless we also start working on new systems and technologies for disposal.

Batteries as power sources eventually get spent. Over time, they degrade and require replacement. But, for every replacement, there will be an issue of disposal. I am uncertain if we have enough regulations — or legislation — to manage the disposal of batteries from electric vehicles. Or, for that matter, disposal of solar panels from solar farms and solar homes, and used turbines from wind farms.

Over time, all these materials degrade, and are replaced.

The problem is that wind turbine blades from wind energy farms cannot be recycled and are now piling up in landfills. As for solar, the International Renewable Energy Agency estimates that by 2050, up to 78 million metric tons of solar panels will have reached the end of their life, and this will result in about six million metric tons of new solar e-waste annually. And with solar panels, when they break down, toxic waste does go into the soil.

As we require industries and businesses to clean their air emissions and their water discharge or general effluents, then we should also require electric car makers to recycle their own batteries; wind farms to recycle their own turbines; solar farms to recycle their own panels; and, computer makers and mobile phone makers to recycle their own e-waste. Their waste shouldn't end up in landfills.

There is a call to actually start mining our e-waste. There is money in garbage. Landfills still attract scavengers, looking for items that can still be reused and sold for some profit. Surplus, as we used to refer to second-hand but reusable car and engine parts sold. The same goes for many other consumer durables. My old printer, for instance, could have yielded plenty of usable parts and components. The same goes for my old washer. That is, had I opted to throw them out.

"The proliferation of digital devices has already become a big problem for the planet, but it's still not receiving the attention it should. Once they come to the end of their useful lives, electronics just get discarded. The recycling rate is still poor, despite the fact they contain valuable minerals that could be used once more and have economic value. Now, scientists are calling to ramp up the recycling of e-waste, describing the expansion of mining as unsustainable," noted the recent article by Fermin Koop in *ZME Science*, an online science news site.

Koop cited a UN report that noted, "A record 53.6 million metric tons of electronic waste were generated worldwide in 2019, up 21% in just five years... E-waste is also predicted to reach 74 million metric tons by 2030, almost doubling its actual figures in 15 years. This makes e-waste the fastest-growing domestic waste stream on a global scale."

He added, "The growing figures are triggered by the high consumption of electronic equipment, short life cycles, and limited options for repair. Only 17% of 2019's e-waste was collected and recycled, the UN found. This means that high-value materials valued at \$57 billion were mostly dumped or burned rather than collected for treatment and reuse. So, recycling electronics is not only an environmental choice but one that could yield economic benefits."

Koop also wrote that "electronics contain dozens of different elements, many of which are technically recoverable, though there are economic limits set by the market. E-waste has precious metals including gold, silver, copper, platinum, and palladium. It also has valuable bulky materials such as iron and aluminum, along with plastics that can be recycled."

It is in this line that I encourage the incoming Congress to look into the possibility of legislating stronger and more practical policies and regulations on e-waste disposal and recycling. It should also consider the disposal of waste from renewable energy sources like solar panels and wind turbines and batteries.

Indeed, our greater reliance on electronics and computers, as well as the shift to renewable energy and other non-fossil fuel sources to save the environment, are the very things that will become the source of our environmental challenges in the future. We should start planning things better and looking into viable and more sustainable "clean up" options. ■

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# The honeymoon period

By Tony Samson

THE first hundred days of a new administration are used as an indicator of its policy priorities, style of decision-making, and political value system. This "honeymoon period" is characterized by some measure of goodwill extended to the new leadership, even by traditional media (not the social one) which still have little basis for criticism — The economic team looks experienced, even with hair dye.

Media (though not all) can get into an adversarial stance, maybe by day 10. Critics can also jump into the fray by then. Political friends and supporters (including old, recent, and two-hours old) caught in the euphoria of change are not yet squabbling over what they feel are betrayed promises. Watch out for the new coalitions of critics from former cheerleaders, especially those expecting to be appointed but who end up disappointed.

The 100-day period establishes the new brand of leadership. Shall the country's brand continue to be a political story in the international media, or an economic one? Can the new administration relaunch a new brand for the country?

To be avoided are "unforced errors." In basketball, which is our metaphor for life, this term refers to infractions that could be avoided like too leisurely bringing down the ball from full court and incurring the eight-second violation to cross half-court. Other examples are stepping on the line and 24-second violation without having taken a shot.

Such issues include sisterly comments (we don't mind media personalities migrating) or attempts to change the names of highways or airports or thinking of commemorative holidays for the upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of you-know-what in September.

After the contest where all issues are divisive and political, the new administration can re-frame its advocacy as an economic one as it has already started to do in



PHILIPPINE STAR/MIGUEL DE GUZMAN

MOTORISTS drive past the National Museum of the Philippines in Manila with the facade lit up with the colors of the Philippine flag on June 3 as part of the commemoration of flag week and the coming 124<sup>th</sup> Philippine Independence Day. The National Museum of Fine Arts, which was the Old Legislative Building, is to be the venue for the inauguration of President-elect Ferdinand "Bongbong" R. Marcos, Jr. on June 30.

its slogans of recovery and coming back to prosperity. One can include climate change and food security just for variety.

Restating the new administration's goal as the pursuit of efficiency, consistency, and a simplification of the rules sharpens the business message and focuses effort and resources in the right direction.

There are possible low-hanging fruits to start with.

The economic team has already been announced. This sent a strong message to media when

priority was given to designating the Secretaries for Finance, Trade and Industry, NEDA, and Tourism. The first headlines were on the economic team. Note that we include tourism here since this defines the new brand too in the international scene.

Using the economy as a theme for the first few speeches includes improving government focus on ease of doing business with digitalization and greater transparency. In selecting speaking engagements, some emphasis needs to be given to business groups

most likely to move forward with the economic theme.

Selecting spokespersons that are economically literate helps. The spokesperson or other media-facing personalities should be able to discuss with ease the economy and the improving business sentiment regarding government, especially with foreign investors. An economically savvy communicator will be comfortable with explaining GDP growth, inflation, and reduction of foreign debt.

Ceremonial events should focus on the economy. Inaugura-

tions of plants, especially large ones with a high component of employment potential present photo opportunities for the overarching theme that the country is open for business.

Surely, it is naive to suppose that the honeymoon period can stick to a purely economic narrative. (Even in real honeymoons, it's not all about... the scenery.) For so long, the country has been a symbol of missed opportunities because of political baggage. There needs to be a concerted effort to stick to an economic story.

A political narrative will persist for sure. There are still unsolved issues like the framing of a legislator needing to be freed from incarceration, or the issue of the freedom of the press with the abrupt non-renewal of a franchise. There are too the persistent statistical arguments on the election results. Some quarters are still fighting that battle.

But has the honeymoon period already started with the end of the canvassing? Then the messaging needs to be launched earlier.

The first 100 days are a narrow window where hope and the feeling of immense possibilities intersect. Love of country should be about believing that economic prosperity is part of our future... and that requires moving forward together. ■

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