# The dramatic social and environmental impact of Black Friday

*On your marks, get set, buy! As Black Friday approaches, consumers are in the starting blocks, retailers are crossing their fingers, and we are getting ready, as we do every year, to rave about this American phenomenon. But is there really a reason to be excited about a feast of over-consumption, reflecting the self-indulgent blindness of high-tech?*

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Originating in the United States, where the day after Thanksgiving traditionally kicks off Christmas shopping, Black Friday is now a major commercial time around the world. In the UK, shoppers are expected to spend an estimated £6B on Black Friday this year, which is an increase of £400M in 2019's estimated figure of £5.6B.

With the launch of the new iPhone, Black Friday is the other marketing highlight of the year for the big-tech sector. Just a few weeks before Christmas, it is the perfect time to promote the latest innovations and offer discounts, which are all the more attractive as they are rare in this field. Tech products are the undisputed stars of Black Friday and its sister Cyber Monday, where they account for more than half of the sales.

Tech players monopolise the conversation around Black Friday, leaving almost no room for debate. Yet this consumerist celebration would be the ideal opportunity to open the debate on the heavy societal and environmental impacts of our digital bulimia. In fact, there would be no

shortage of topics. What about the minerals from conflict zones, such as coltan from Central Africa, which we find in our smartphones? What about the working conditions of workers in the sector, highlighted by the suicides at Foxconn? What about the trap of programmed obsolescence and the non-repairability of devices? And finally, what about the uncontrolled growth of electronic waste (WEEE), which has reached a record 53.6 million metric tonnes (Mt) in 2019 up 21% in just five years?

Of course, the sector has no interest in allowing a critical discourse to develop that could call into question its model based on volumes (more than 7 billion iPhones produced between 2007-17) and an unbridled race for innovation. But it is striking that public opinion, which is usually so vigilant when it comes to food, cosmetics, cars or energy, is so silent. With technology, the consumer seems to adopt the attitude of the three monkeys of wisdom - "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" - and is bravely content with marketing that is a little more sophisticated than that of the automotive industry 50 years ago. Processor frequency has replaced revolutions per minute, but we are similarly content with a vaguely understandable technical argument in exchange for a promise of performance, escape and a symbol of social success.

These simple, elegant objects, literally and figuratively airtight and capable of such amazing feats, are beyond our understanding. Glass? Metal? Plastic? We can't even identify what they're made of anymore. They hold such power over us, and have taken on so much importance, that we don't dare question them. And just like the glory days of "a car for everyone," their inconveniences are too distant and (seemingly) minimal to distract us from the pleasure of "moving with the times" and the reassuring certainty of not missing out.

But in the end, we can't help but understand why intellectual laziness plays a large role in our voluntary blindness. Fraud, doubt, and risk is everywhere. Everything is suspicious, everything is contaminated. Why

not allow ourselves the small luxury of dreaming about a future that is as clean, sleek and efficient as a smartphone, for once? While it's true that consumers aren't encouraged to demystify their devices, it's also true that they haven't shown much desire to do so. But if we don't make room for critical thinking, and begin asking the important questions, no alternative digital models that may be more moral and sane will ever emerge to see the light of day. As in any domain, change can only happen through pressure from the people at large, whether consumers or voters. As long as individuals don't want to face up to the dramatic social and environmental costs of our excessive consumption of tech products, the situation won't change. That is truly the darkest aspect of Black Friday.

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