

# Blue Planet II shows our throwaway culture is a global problem

Cyber Monday-style consumerism is helping to fuel a frightening surge in e-waste



A scene featuring surfing Bottlenose dolphins in South Africa from Blue Planet II (Image: PA)

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I wrote [last week about Black Friday](#), the culmination of an unholy week of consumerism, and the fact that relentless advertising campaigns tended to obscure the continuation of the UK's personal debt crisis.

But for [many people](#) the fact that the high streets and shopping centres seemed unusually quiet indicated that this US import had simply not taken off here and that perhaps the culture of overspending was on the wane.



Cardiff on Black Friday 2017 (Image: Rob Browne)

This is demonstrably untrue.

Though shops did suffer a drop in footfall numbers in comparison to last year, spending online [reached £1.4bn](#) up 11.4% from 2016.

According to [research carried out by professional services network Price Waterhouse Cooper](#) this is not a generational trend - all age groups are increasingly shopping online with 60% of over 65's doing their shopping through their devices.

That we are a nation online is hardly news, but the [latest usage figures](#) from the Office of Communications (OFCOM) are revealing.

The proportion of adults in the UK with broadband connection stands at 83% while the proportion of adults who either own or use a mobile phone stands at 94%.

(Image: Chris Radburn/PA Wire)

Just think about ubiquity of iPhones. Apple has introduced three new models in the last quarter of this year alone: there were two iPhone 8s launched in September and the hugely hyped iPhone X appeared early in November.

The global reaction to the latter was startling. [People queued outside stores](#) the world over to buy, at £999 or equivalent, the most expensive smartphone ever.

Which is obviously great news for Apple - whose share price increased on the back of projected sales. [According to the Guardian](#) it's now worth now worth more than \$868bn, closer to becoming the world's first trillion-dollar company.

In the UK, our enthusiasm for electronic and electrical goods continues to increase. In 2016 households purchased approximately [£7.7bn worth](#) of household appliances.

But as [electronics writer Graham Pitcher points out](#): the UK is a throwaway society when it comes to consumer electronics devices - we "bin" 23.5kg of e-waste per person per year.

The passion for smartphones, and in particular the desire to own the latest model, seems to me (along with the marketing trick of the century - [bottled water](#)) to be emblematic of a throwaway culture which is having a profound impact upon us and our planet.

The success of the [BBC's Blue Planet II](#) has highlighted the impact of plastic in the oceans but it what is possibly less well known is that, according to the [United Nations, global electronic e-waste has reached record high levels](#) with projected quantities expected to reach 50 million metric tonnes by 2018.

**MORE:** [The incredible spider crabs footage from Blue Planet II? You can see a similar thing off the Welsh coast](#)

In the last 10 years or so, toxic waste from the UK, found in household items such as mobile phones, televisions, dishwashers and washing machines, has been transported across the world.

The fact is that rapid and seemingly inexorable technological change is combined with insatiable consumer demand for the newest product. When you factor in planned obsolescence (the manufacture of products with a limited lifespan) and a less than rigorous approach to recycling then waste levels are bound to increase.

The impact of all this is most keenly felt in what has been traditionally described as the developing world.

The [UN Environment Programme \(UNEP\)](#) research programme has found that West Africa is a major destination for waste.

And as Asia develops as both the major manufacturer and market for electrical and electronic equipment, so [its e-waste problem intensifies](#).

China's transformation from a largely agrarian based economy into an industrialised superpower has created a burgeoning middle class with a disposable income. They are eager to consume the products until recently unavailable to them.

[According to journalist Katrina Yu](#) the country's recycling system is struggling to keep up.

In the meantime, Professor Jiang Jianguo of Beijing's Tsinghua University told Wu, China's increasingly wealthy and image conscious consumers are buying the latest goods, and trashing them, faster than ever before.

So what we have is truly global problem.

[To paraphrase Tisha Brown](#), oceans campaigner for Greenpeace UK, we shouldn't buy things because they are bargains. Stuff has a price, and our oceans, forests and wild-life are paying their share of that price, even when we aren't.

## **A TABLOID LOVE STORY**

Has public reaction to the engagement of Prince Harry to Meghan Markle been one of celebratory anticipation or stolid indifference?

Somewhere in between, I'd guess, but for those in the media bubble it was certainly the former, as the level [adulation and fawning](#) on the front pages of the national tabloids indicated a longing for simpler times and a welcome respite from the daily grind of Brexit, Trump and austerity.

Yes, it was a right royal throwback as both the Mail and the Sun resorted to the tried and tested souvenir editions. The main portrait pictures were of the happy couple smiling, waving and gazing into each other's eyes.

"SHE'S THE ONE" said the Sun while the Mail gave us the Prince's clearly love-struck devotion in his own words: "the stars were all aligned...this beautiful woman just fell into my life".

And if this sort of coverage does nothing else it does at least demonstrate an admirable about-turn from the Sun, particularly, which just over a year ago upset the Prince with [its "Harry's girl on Pornhub" story](#).

Indeed, so incensed was Harry by the story and general coverage that he took the highly unusual step of [issuing a public statement](#) condemning the “abuse and harassment” that Meghan had been subject to along with the, “racial undertones of some of the pieces”.

Let’s hope there’s none of that in the coming months and if you are already fed up with the brouhaha, I suggest you brace yourself. This is not just the domain of the tabloids. The Guardian’s Martin Belam, their senior social reporter, tweeted the day after the announcement that “4 of the 6 most read things on the @guardian yesterday were about Harry and Meghan”.

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