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The Digital Age was expected to usher in an era of clean production, an alternative to smokestack industries and their pollutants. But as environmental journalist Elizabeth Grossman reveals in this penetrating analysis of high tech manufacture and disposal, digital may be sleek, but it's anything but clean. Deep within every electronic device lie toxic materials that make up the bits and bytes, a complex thicket of lead, mercury, cadmium, plastics, and a host of other often harmful ingredients.

Driven by built-in obsolescence and the desire of consumers for smaller, faster and sleeker hardware, millions of discarded plastic computer casings, lead-infused monitors, antiquated cellphones and even dead TV remote controls-the "effluent of the affluent"-are piling up annually in America's landfills, leaching dangerous toxins, including lead, mercury and arsenic, into the nation's water tables. Such cast-off "e-waste" is also being shipped to countries like India and China, where for pennies a day workers without masks or gloves boil circuit boards over primitive braziers to extract microchips (along with a slew of noxious elements), after which the silicon chips are bathed in open vats of acid to precipitate out micrograms of gold. In either instance, according to this alarming and angry study, the way in which America currently handles its cyber-age waste amounts to an ongoing but underreported environmental crisis. Grossman (Watershed: The Undamming of America) points to recycling regulations in Europe as models and demands that manufacturers of high-end technology assume more of the burden for safe disposal of discarded electronics. Her call for action is commendable and critical, but this book's often daunting jargon (pages are given over to a difficult discussion of different kinds of bromodiphenyl ethers and their varying impact on the environment) sometimes undercuts its passion.

Elizabeth Grossman is the author of Watershed: The Undamming of America and Adventuring Along the Lewis and Clark Trail and co-editor of Shadow Cat: Encountering the American Mountain Lion. Her work has appeared in The Washington Post, Salon, The Nation, Orion, High Country News and other publications.

Teléfonos: 55 44 73 40 y 55 44 72 91

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