

Confronted by the ugliness of tech manufacturing with stories focusing on Apple, what's a consumer to do?

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The drumbeat of revelations about conditions in the factories that manufacture Apple products in recent weeks has had a sobering effect on me.

I got an iPod in 2006, my first Apple gadget in a decade. Then I bought a MacBook in 2009, followed by the iPhone 3GS in 2010. And this Christmas, I received the iPad2. Throw in iCloud, iMatch for music, and a possible Apple TV in my near future, and it's fair to say that I'm ensconced in Apple products.

And that was just fine, until the past two weeks when my Apple lifestyle ran headfirst into a pair of New York Times investigative articles, an episode of the radio show "This American Life," and a detailed report by Apple itself that made plain the ugly conditions under which the company's products are manufactured. The people who built my beloved gadgets did so under inhuman conditions that would never be tolerated in this country.

For the past week, I've struggled with two questions: How should I feel about this? And what should we, the consumers of these devices, do?

Let me start by making clear that while the focus has been on Apple, this is how almost all tech companies build their products. While some of the Times' stories try to make the case that Apple may be worse than other tech companies, I find that debatable.

Apple declined to comment on the recent barrage of bad publicity. Yet I'm sure the company feels unfairly singled out, and not without some justification. Apple understandably could argue that it handed its critics the club to beat the company with.

As the Times' stories note, Apple established a code of conduct for its suppliers in 2005 and has released annual audits of working conditions in its supply chain since 2007, conducting hundreds of inspections. Two weeks ago, the company's latest report made big headlines because it disclosed the identities of most of its suppliers.

Apple's own report noted repeated violations of child labor laws, living conditions, working hours, and safety among its suppliers. Still, the company expressed pride that conditions were improving, that it was more transparent than any competitor, and that it

had agreed to allowed a nonprofit called the Fair Labor Association to conduct its own monitoring.

"We also used our influence to substantially improve working conditions for people who make our products," wrote Apple CEO Tim Cook in a letter to employees that was leaked. "No one is making improvements for workers in the way Apple is doing now."

So is the sole focus on Apple unfair? Yes, to a point. The company does disclose more than other tech companies. And it has taken clear steps in some cases to stop the very worst practices.

But it's also fair for critics to ask why Apple hasn't been able to stop all violations. Why hasn't progress been faster? If Apple did even more, it's reasonable to think others would follow since they use many of the same outsourcing firms.

And yet, even if most of these suppliers were in compliance, that still often means getting them to norms that we would never tolerate in the U.S. Workweeks of 60 hours, employees squeezed into dorms, and treasured because they are so pliable. Should I be feeling queasy about this?

To my surprise, "This American Life" quoted New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, a noted human rights crusader, as defending the Chinese labor system as a positive step in the evolution of the country's economy. Indeed, he's not the only person who believes that while the work may be harsh, it's an improvement over the hardscrabble, poverty-stricken conditions that existed previously.

"I think it's useful to be reminded about how grim the conditions are," Kristof says in the show. "But again, I just think that if you try to think how you can fight poverty most effectively, and what has fought it within China, then I think sweatshops are a key part of that answer."

If this is true, then we also have to recognize that conditions have never magically improved on their own. Progress happens because people demand it. And so while Apple deserves kudos for being better than some, the company began to take many of these steps only after being pressured to do so.

Tech companies rationalize the need to cut costs despite mounting profits because they need to appease Wall Street expectations for growth and higher margins. But it seems Cook and Apple have an opportunity to draw a line here and challenge the power of Wall Street by raising pay for factory employees, offer bonuses to suppliers

who improve conditions, while still making fantastic piles of money.

But this doesn't excuse us. Because at the end of the day, tech executives offer a simple reason as to why they claim they have no choice but to turn to places like China to build these products.

"You can either manufacture in comfortable, worker-friendly factories, or you can reinvent the product every year, and make it better and faster and cheaper, which requires factories that seem harsh by American standards," a current Apple executive told the New York Times. "And right now, customers care more about a new iPhone than working conditions in China."

That raises the issue of our personal responsibility here. This is where I've been feeling morally ambiguous. My first instinct was to ask, "Should I dump all of my Apple products?"

No, said Liana Foxvog, a spokeswoman for the International Labor Rights Forum, in an email.

"Consumers shouldn't necessarily stress too much about what laptop, smartphone, or tablet they are buying since the working conditions are often similar between brands given the overlap in contractors," she wrote. "Rather, through collective action, consumers could demand a living wage for the manufacturing workers, compliance with labor laws of the country and with international labor standards."

And this is where things get uncomfortable. How far are any of us willing to go to put pressure on the tech industry and lawmakers? Are you willing to boycott the tech industry? Could you go a whole year without buying any gadgets?

Many folks I put this question to on Twitter and Facebook answered, "No way!" Some argued this would hurt employees and factory workers, while others said we have to hope the negative press will improve things. But that still strikes me as a rationalization for doing nothing.

In other circumstances, such as grape boycotts to protest farmworker conditions, poultry boycotts, or pressure on companies to cease investments in South Africa, boycotts have proven the most effective means for average folks to wield their collective power. Indeed, just recall the impact of the Internet blackout Jan. 18.

I don't think it's come to that. Yet, we would be wrong to believe we are powerless to change things. If things don't improve, and we make excuses to turn our heads away, then the real blame for these conditions falls squarely on us.