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I didn't mourn Steve Jobs

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I didn't mourn Steve Jobs

Apple is good at separating consumers from their money, but the price its workers pay is much greater, writes **Michael I. Niman**

I know I'm skating on thin ice. Writing about the FBI, CIA, NSA, or any of the other spook agencies? No problem. But mention the deceased Steve Jobs as anything other than saintly or god-like and you've crossed over the line. Spinning his departure as anything other than a tragic loss for humanity is treason against our species.

But we've got to stop drinking this Kool-Aid. It was a true testimony to the omnipotence of corporate culture when a critical mass of Occupy Wall Street protestors zombied up in a moment of silence to mourn the one-percenter who planted his own revenue stream in so many of their pockets.

It's now been more than a month since Jobs was finally humbled by burial: Can we clear the tears from our glazed eyes and talk about this?

Steve Jobs made his fortune by transitioning Apple from a computer manufacturer into an electronics design and marketing company that "outsourced" the actual production of its products to Asian sweatshops. This is the Nike model. Get rid of the clunky, capital-intensive accoutrements of 20th-century industrialism, such as factories that need maintenance and workers who demand a living wage. Instead of building products, Jobs concentrated on building a brand – a super brand with a cult-like following. With this brand in hand, Apple was

able to contract out to faceless suppliers who squeezed their slim profit margin from an over-worked and underpaid workforce.

Under Jobs's watch, city-sized factories sprung up in China, pumping out iPods, iPhones, iPads, iMacs, and Macbooks by the dozens of millions. The largest producer of iBling is a Taiwanese company by the name of Foxconn that fulfills most of its Apple orders at two massive factories in China. Its Longhua, Shenzhen complex employs as many as 450,000 workers and covers a footprint of more than one square mile. Its Chengdu factory was built in just 70 days, opening in October 2010 in order to meet the demand for second-generation iPads, and is able to pump out 40 million units per year. Chengdu workers, according to a Hong Kong human rights group, stand on their feet for up to 14 hours a day working at repetitive, mind-and body-numbing tasks.

These Foxconn plants are walled compounds where employees eat, sleep, and work, with restaurants, grocery stores, banks, clinics, gymnasiums, and even a company-run TV station located onsite. Workers mostly live, eight to 10 to a room, in company-owned dormitories, suffering a quasi-military management regimen. When iPhone sales took off in 2009, the company, according to one human rights agency investigation, forced the workforce to labor as many as 120 hours per month overtime

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in order to keep Apple stores in the US and Europe stocked. As a result, Apple's profits defied Wall Street's bear market, with a seemingly endless supply of its popular products.

At the same time, Foxconn's production line workers started jumping to their deaths. In response, the company festooned some of its most depressing dormitories with anti-suicide netting, and, according to the *Huffington Post*, made new hires sign an anti-suicide pledge.

So yeah, I'm dumbfounded by all the mourning. Sure, Jobs was a visionary, but his vision was a dark one. To face up to that, however, means having to come to terms with the nasty realities of our own fetishistic consumerism. All of this iShit has to come from somewhere. And that somewhere is Chengdu and Shenzhen.

Dig deeper and you'll find raw materials sourced from deadly, low-bidding mines across Africa. You'll find mine tailings poisoning communities just as you'll find iWorkers on assembly lines poisoned by solvents and crippled by hyper-paced repetitive movements.

To hold Jobs accountable for what he represents means having to think about our own complicity in fueling the iDeath industries. So we'll mourn Jobs and ignore the victims of the suicide clusters in the Apple supply line.

Sure, Apple has a code of ethics. So do the public relations and advertising industries. It works like this: Apple contracts out to have products produced at impossible prices. Journalists and human rights activists catch Apple suppliers violating said code. Apple condemns the supplier's practice, even going as far as cutting contracts with some smaller, nonessential vendors. In high-profile cases, Jobs himself made cameo media appearances to righteously condemn his own contractors.

But the problem was never rogue suppliers violating Apple's ethics. The problem was Jobs's business model, which guaran-

teed that suppliers would engage in a cost-cutting race to the bottom. And this model, no matter how many workers jumped from dormitory roofs in Shenzhen, was never up for debate. Apple, with its distinctively unique, popular, high-profit product line and devoted customer base, was well situated to make a break from the sweatshop model – but under Jobs's leadership, it instead chose to expand morally repugnant outsourcing practices.

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Living in an iWorld
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Even if Apple's iGoods were somehow produced sustainably in safe factories where workers earned living wages, I still wouldn't have mourned his passing. The inventions he shepherded to market have certainly changed the world. But has that really been a good thing? The Apple model is the antithesis of the open-source movement celebrated by the anarcho-techie set. Apple hardware is usually mated to proprietary software and peripherals. In some cases, running non-proprietary software, as in breaking free of Steve Jobs's vision of how you as a consumer should behave, violates your Apple hardware warranty.

Apple gizmos traffic your desires to Apple-owned stores. Its iTunes store now dominates the global music industry, dictating terms to musicians and music labels who want access to Apple's near-monopoly platform. Its iPhone App Store can festoon your iPhone screen with a plethora of corporate brands, but also acts as a gatekeeper, locking other applications out of the booming iMarket. Details on Apple's predatory market practices fill books and court documents. It's not technological innovation alone that explains Apple's market dominance in tablets, phones, and music players. As with their predatory production model, Apple, under Jobs's leadership, has been ruthless in its quest to dominate markets, and in turn, consumers. From where I sit, I can only see unbridled greed.

While technology users quickly develop dependence on their new gadgets, Apple users often develop an additional dependence on the brand, whose product logic and software often make transitioning to a competing platform cumbersome and even intimidating.

Under Jobs's leadership, Apple developed partnerships with other mega-brands. Magazines, for example, now tout special features such as videos that are exclusively available online for their subscribers – but more and more, the catch is you can only view your bonus on your Apple iPad, much like products in stores want to “talk” to your iPhone. What this all adds up to is one corporation with an increasing presence in every aspect of your life – and a diminish-

ing number of options to circumvent that inevitable relationship.

Apple, under Jobs's tutelage, has used this presence very effectively to separate consumers from their money. Buying an Apple product is not a one-time purchase. Rather, it's a sort of conversion to a consumer sect, the beginning of a relationship that will maintain an enduring flow of money from you to Apple.

This is Steve Jobs's legacy. It is truly brilliant. And yes, your iPhone is very impressive. I still don't get the mourning. **CT**

Dr. Michael I. Niman is a professor of journalism and media studies at Buffalo State College. His previous columns are archived at www.mediastudy.com

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