**18 CAN SMARTPHONES EVER BE “SUSTAINABLE”?**

When its C.E.O founded Fairphone, a company which aims to develop smartphones with a minimal environmental impact, in 2013, he didn’t own a mobile phone. “I’m pretty vulnerable to addiction!” the 43-year-old Dutchman, Van Abel, told me when we spoke over video call. “I’m a workaholic. One of the reasons I didn’t have a phone was to prevent myself from being connected all the time.” It wasn’t until Van Abel made his own phone that he started using one. But Fairphone, which was in 2015 named Europe’s fastest-growing start-up, was not conceived simply as another product. Rather, Van Abel and his team started the project to tell a pressing story about the side-effects of consumption […]. “The question at the time was how to get the story of conflict minerals all the way through to the consumer. It was more set up as a campaign to raise awareness about the problem,” he said.

Minerals including gold, silver, cobalt and tungsten are found in smartphones and computers […] many of these are “conflict minerals”: mined in conditions of armed conflict and human rights abuses, and sold by armed groups. But once we hold a shiny new phone in our hands, many thousands of miles away from the countries where the mining takes place, these brutal origins are often forgotten. Van Abel chose to tell this story through the smartphone because the object is, he said, “the biggest paradox we have”. “We’re super-connected to our phone, it’s super-important to us, but we know nothing about it because it’s so complex. It’s kind of a black box.”

Fairphone […] has an open dialogue with its customers about the origin of its materials. It is committed, over time, to paying a living wage and upholding high labour conditions for the workers at every stage of a phone’s complex supply chain. Fairphone also has an environmental aim: to minimise electronic waste, one of the world’s fastest growing waste streams. Figures show that although the life cycle of a smartphone (the length of time someone has their phone for) has been steadily increasing, users in the UK kept their phones for an average of around 28 months in 2018. For all its ethical advantages, Fairphone has encountered lots of challenges in attempting to live up to its name. Van Abel admits it is a “fairer” phone rather than flat-out “fair”, though over time, he hopes it will more than earn its title. Fairphone’s commitment to sustainability demands an incremental approach. It works with local mining communities to phase out conflict minerals in its phones one by one. Being “sustainable” is, after all, about finding long-term solutions rather than solving the world’s problems overnight.

Adapted from The New Statesman October 2020 (453 words)