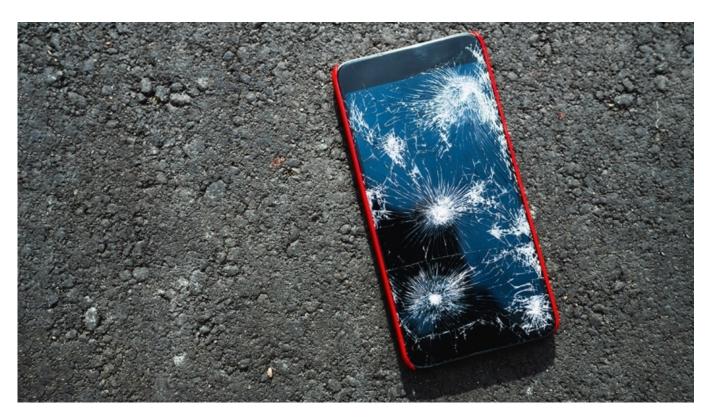# The Ethics of Repairability

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Introduction

Repairability is an uncommon word with a simple meaning – the capacity of something to be repaired if the need arises. It follows that repairability is an important feature of any product, involving issues as diverse as consumer rights, with ecological footprints, declining natural resources, and excessive consumerism. Unfortunately, it is clear that many new products introduced on the market are increasingly difficult to repair. The European Environmental Bureau (EEB) observes that by intentionally depriving people of the right to repair, companies may gain from increased sales, but it comes at the expense of consumers and the planet. Decreasing durability of household appliances combined with lack of repairability has manifold impacts in terms of emissions, waste and pollution.

The environment is being seriously affected due to the declining capacity of landfill. A United Nations supported study found that in 2019, 53.6 million tons of electronic waste (e-waste) was discarded globally, however only 9.33 million tons (17.4%) of that e-waste was recycled; the remaining 44.27 million tonnes (82.6%) of e-waste was not dispose of in an environmentally safe way. Irresponsible dumping of waste into the ocean is creating things like the 'Great Pacific Garbage Patch'. In this short article, we look into the ethics of repairability, discuss how repair can serve as a solution to many of the problems of the throwaway society, and highlight the role of individuals, companies and policy in fostering a culture of repairing.

Repairing – a lost art

Previous generations were not just the owners of the material goods in their possession but also their custodians. They felt a responsibility for the goods they owned, maintained them with care, and ensured that appliances and other household items remained in good condition for as long as possible. The first option was to repair broken things rather than discard them. Even a few decades ago, repairing had an important role in strengthening intergenerational connections. Essentially, other than the economic and environmental benefits, the sentimental value of restored items that were used by previous generations was much higher than brand new products.

Unfortunately, over the last few decades, repairing has become a lost art. Unlike our parents, we rarely repair things – we just get rid of them as it is easier to buy a new product than making the effort of repairing the existing product, especially electronic gadgets including domestic appliances, smart phones, laptops, and so on.

Although the ease of replacement is linked to some consumers' lack of interest in fixing malfunctioning products, a 2014 Eurobarometer survey found that if easy repair was accessible, 77% of EU citizens were willing to repair their goods instead of buying new ones. This indicates the majority of consumers desire longer-lasting products. Nevertheless, the emergence of a throwaway society has largely been promoted by profit-seeking manufacturers and the inactions of policymakers. In the absence of well-defined laws around repairability, below are some ways manufacturers discourage repairing to increase profits and protect trade secrets:

- Designing items that have highly complex mechanisms with components fitting together in very small enclosures.
- Using unusual screws or unconventional screws (many consumers do not have special screw-driver toolkit; you may ruin the item by trying to open it)
- Inaccessibility to faulty parts (e.g., battery in an electric toothbrush)
- Sealing or gluing things together instead of using screws (glued assemblies)
- Using tamper-proof cases that make it difficult to open
- Unavailability of spare parts and accessories at a competitive price
- Expensive spare parts
- Absence of repair instructions in the manual
- Actively trying to thwart third party repair
- Warnings on the product that repair is hazardous
- Threat that warnings will void warranty
- Short warranty period
- Making products heavily computer controlled (such as cars) that makes repairing complicated and expensive

In sum, many companies are adopting the strategy of planned obsolescence (products are designed in such a way that they will break down and they are not repairable and need replacement). Taken together, repairing is not only an economic case, an environmental case, and a social case, it is also an ethical case.

The value of fixing

The world's finite resources are depleting quickly, which is also accelerating climate change. A study by EEB found that a long-lasting (and repairable) washing machine is estimated to generate about 1.1 tonnes less CO_2 over 20 years than a short-lived model. This estimation has taken into account stages including manufacturing, distribution, use, and end-of-life disposal. Further, extending the lifespans of all notebooks, smartphones, vacuum cleaners and washing machines in the EU market by just two years would save about 4 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO_2) per year, which is equivalent to taking more than 2 million cars off the roads per year. Therefore, a world-wide culture of fixing things will enable us to be able to fix the future as it will lead to less resource usage in manufacturing and less need for transporting new products (hence less carbon emission).

According to the US Public Interest Research Group (PRIG), a robust repair ecosystem with many people engaged in repairing jobs (more employment) will reduce costs, enable quicker service and help people maintain their lifestyle. A report by US PRIG revealed that repairing (or repairability) can save US citizens $40 billion per year (22% reduction in the expenditure on electrical and electronic appliances; around 4330 saving per family per year). Since repair is labour-intensive and time-intensive, a repair economy can also create more jobs.

Further, restoring a repairing society will not only empower consumers, but also help us become more familiar with the appliances we own, and redefine our connection with material objects. The mindset of fixing broken products will boost our sense of ownership and care and also encourage us to fix our broken relationships with fellow human beings.

Repair Cafe – an emerging revolution

Repair cafés are of recent origin. In 2009 Martine Potsma, a journalist, started the first repair café in Amsterdam, primarily to address the impending waste problem that she witnessed around her. From a humble beginning, in 2018, about 1622 repair cafés were operating in 36 countries. In 2020 the number rose to 2091 repair cafés spread across 37 countries. In 2011 Martine started a Repair Café Foundation that offers professional support for all the repair café movements worldwide.

Repair cafés offer a face-to-face meeting platform for repair enthusiasts and people needing to repair things. This is a voluntary free gathering that helps with any local repair needs of communities, from clothes to computers. Repair cafés are run regularly; weekly in some cases, monthly or seasonally in most times. Members of the community gather to repair and learn to repair things that in most times, are fruitful outings. Only the more challenging cases are referred to specialist repair shops.

This relatively new phenomenon of the community-led repair revolution can subtly make fundamental changes in society and the environment. For one, it allows people to rediscover the old art of repairing that is both empowering and satisfying at a personal level. Most importantly, repairs extend product life, reducing waste and the need for more resources to make new products. The propensity to reuse products would go a long way in controlling CO2 emissions that contribute towards the net-zero emission targets committed by most parts of the world by 2050. For instance, 37.2 million tonnes of durable goods were dumped into the landfills in the U.S in 2017. This was about 27% of the total landfills that year, and the bulk of it could have been repaired and reused. A newfound repair culture will also be an economic phenomenon if the repair café movement gathers momentum, generating jobs, livelihoods, and significant savings for families, especially during the pandemic. Besides, local repairing initiatives could make communities kinder and caring.

Repair cafés have the potential to become the lifeblood of a circular economy, which is defined as "*a system that has the ability to restore, retain and redistribute materials, components and products back into the system in an optimised manner and for as long as it is environmentally, technically, socially and economically feasible*." Community-based repair cafés could play a critical role in restoring, retaining, and redistributing products into the system in a sustainable fashion, meaningfully contributing to a circular economic system.

Our roles in repairing

Individual

Individuals play a significant role in the repairing revolution. Repair cafés are community initiatives fuelled by individual participation. Individuals participating in this initiative would be motivated for many reasons. Passion for a sustainable lifestyle would be the prime among them. Economic benefits and appeal for voluntary service would be other motivations. However, most importantly, a drive for empowerment and challenging the unethical corporate mandate for rebuying goods and services would be a significant mindset that drives repairing enthusiasts in communities. Hence, repairing and repairing café movements should be viewed in light of an ethical, sustainable practice that makes local communities self-sufficient and sustainable.

Corporations

Corporates should consider it an opportunity rather than a threat. Repair cafés and repairing hubs may act as a network of partners of manufacturing organisations to help customers fulfil the need for sustainable consumption. Also, encouraging the repairing café movement could positively contribute to an organisation's corporate social responsibility commitments and ethical reputation. Therefore, ideally, the manufacturing organisations should promote the repair café initiatives by sponsoring such events and upskill the people with publicity fairs for repairing. Such thorough grassroots relationship-building goes a long way in building corporate image and ethical brands. Also, the gifted repair enthusiasts would be a goldmine of opportunities for companies to engineer new product innovations and increase the efficiency of existing products and services.

Government

The government should also encourage sustainable consumption habits in the communities, contributing to wastage reduction and reduced emissions. Repairing culture, among other initiatives, would most effectively contain increased CO2 and other greenhouse gas emissions. Creating a sustainable society is like building a healthy economy, circular and green. Also, self-sufficient communities would be the engine of the economic growth and prosperity of a country. New jobs creation and propensity for savings would help families and individuals with sustainability, especially during difficult times like the pandemic.

Conclusion

In closing, repairing has the power to change the world silently, as a quiet revolution. This revolution is timely and necessary for our times. Repairing is ethical in its demeanour and inspires an increased moral sense of life. Remembering Margaret Thatcher famous words, "No generation has a freehold on this earth. All we have is a life tenancy with a full repairing lease." So, repairing is our birthright. Fostering it in our lives would make the world a better place to live for us and the generations to come.

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