

‘Right to repair’ movement growing in Australia, as Apple and others design products with shorter lifespans



By Rosie King, Jul 10 2021,

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In 2021, almost everything we use is smart. From phones to fridges, coffee machines to tractors. It has made life more efficient and convenient - but when those products break, it's another story. Not only is a quick, cheap fix hard to come by, but intentional designs that shorten the lifespans of these technologies are also putting more of them on the waste pile.

It's why Canberra bus driver Shaun Stephens has made a hobby of repairing electronics himself. I think it all started when I was kid - I just wanted to know how the internal parts of things worked, and it went from there," Mr Stephens said.

"I've fixed plenty of phones, computers, various bits of electronics and even household appliances... the most challenging would have to be the Apple products. They're very time-consuming and just fiddly.

"They're really not designed to be repaired, basically."

Increasingly, manufacturers are dictating who repairs their products, and limiting the amount of information they share with third parties, including independent repairers like Mr Stephens.

It was from this that the global 'right to repair' movement was born.

Griffith University intellectual property law professor Leanne Wiseman said the same frustrations with broken technology had seen the movement gain ground in Australia too.

"I think it's a really big problem for consumers," Professor Wiseman said.

"We own these goods, in terms of physical rights of ownership - shouldn't we be able to actually have a look at how that good works and choose a repairer down the road, as opposed to the manufacturer?"



Australia is playing catch up on repairer rights

The Productivity Commission is currently considering whether copyright law should be changed to enable third-party repairers to copy and share manuals and access hidden data.

It is also assessing whether laws to prohibit manufacturers from voiding warranties if customers use unauthorised repairers are necessary.

But while the right-to-repair movement is gaining momentum here, Australia is lagging behind much of the world.

The United Kingdom has introduced right to repair rules that legally require companies to make spare parts available, and United States President Joe Biden recently signed an executive order directing the Federal Trade Commission to draft new regulations that would give consumers more rights to repair products independently.

Why do people want the right to repair?

No matter the country, price is one of the biggest factors for advocates of the movement. A lack of competition in the repair market means customers can't hunt around for a good deal.

Consumer advocacy group CHOICE's campaigns director Erin Turner said competition was necessary to bring prices down.

"That's what makes it cheaper for people to get quick, easy and cheap repairs," Ms Turner said.

"We've seen this in the phone market, where companies like Apple have pretty deliberately stopped customers from going to repair companies outside of the Apple network."

There is also growing pressure on manufacturers to build products that are made to last or, at the very least, easy to repair.

"In our parents' generation, they'd get a fridge and it would last for 30 or 40 years," Professor Wiseman said.

"We've got fridges now that if a simple part breaks, often the manufacturer will replace that fridge rather than repair it because the products aren't being designed in a way that allow for parts to be replaced or repaired."

"That is contributing to this huge and growing problem of e-waste."

Consumer groups say we need a ‘repairability’ rating system

CHOICE has been pushing for a durability and repairability rating system to be introduced.

Similar to the water and energy efficiency star labels now seen on common household appliances, it would give consumers an idea of how long the appliance was expected to last and how easy it would be to get replacement parts if needed.

Five icons with ratings on a scale from one to ten indicate a low score, coloured red, and a high score, coloured green.



The French government has introduced a labelling system to communicate the repairability of a product.

“We’re now seeing manufacturers compete on water and energy efficiency, but we don’t see that when it comes to aspects of durability,” Ms Turner said.

“We consistently find that there are products on the market that cost a great deal and don’t deliver on quality.”

Companies like Amazon, Apple and Google have expressed concern that opening up their intellectual property to independent repairers could expose it to exploitation, and could also impact the security and safety of their devices.

But the federal government is committed to change in this space.

“The central question is less whether the concept of right to repair for consumers is supported but rather, how repair rights may best be implemented in practice,” a spokesman for Assistant Minister for Waste Reduction Trevor Evans said.

The Productivity Commission’s final report is due later this year.

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