**The Right to Repair**

Imagine that you spent over a thousand dollars on your laptop just a few years ago, but now it barely holds a charge. Without a new battery, you’re **tethered** to an outlet, which is both wildly inconvenient and not the point of a laptop. But it turns out that a new battery is impossible to install anyway, so you feel forced to **drop** another grand on a new laptop, even though your old one works perfectly fine otherwise. This is actually a near-universal experience, whether it involves a laptop, a phone, or a car.

As products get more difficult to repair, a growing right-to-repair movement has been pushing for legislation that requires access to repair tools. In 2021, President Joe Biden signed an executive order that pushes the Federal Trade Commission to make third-party product repair easier, but that’s just part of the larger issue. Let’s take a look at how and why any of this matters.

**What is “right to repair”?**

The idea behind “right to repair” is in the name: If you own something, you should be able to repair it yourself or take it to a technician of your choice. People are pretty used to this concept when it comes to older cars and appliances, but right-to-repair **advocates** argue that modern tech, especially anything with a computer chip inside, is rarely repairable.

Legally, American shoppers are mostly already allowed to repair whatever they buy (those warranty-voiding stickers you’ve probably seen on gadgets are usually **bogus** under the Magnuson Moss Warranty Act[[1]](#footnote-1)), but practically speaking, people are often d……….. the information or the parts to do so. This is where the right-to-repair movement comes in. The Repair Association, a right-to-repair advocacy group, has several policy objectives, including some that can be corrected with laws and others that require a shift in buyer expectations. Those objectives are:

* Make information available: Everyone should have reasonable access to manuals, schematics, and software updates. Software licenses shouldn’t limit support options and should make clear what’s included in a sale.
* Make parts and tools available: The parts and tools to service devices, including diagnostic tools, should be made available to third parties, including individuals.
* Allow unlocking: The government should legalize unlocking, adapting, or modifying a device, so an owner can install custom software.
* Accommodate repair in the design: Devices should be designed in a way as to make repair possible.

The first two bullet points are included in most right-to-repair legislative proposals. Software licensing is where the laws get strange, but for now, there’s an exemption in the Digital Millennium Copyright Act that makes it legal to “jailbreak” devices such as phones, speakers, appliances, and nearly anything else. This **exemption** theoretically allows a device to run custom software, which can extend its life or functionality if the manufacturer abandons that device. However, just because such modifications are legal doesn’t mean they’re possible, and manufacturers routinely push out updates to block jailbreaking.

The last core idea, designing with repairability in mind, is less about **enacting** laws and more about shifting expectations. Gay Gordon-Byrne, executive director of the Repair Association, notes that although currently proposed right-to-repair laws focus on the first two objectives, “There's obviously a lot of other work that needs to be done to make sure that we stop making things that can’t be fixed.”

One potential way to **tackle** the design problem comes from France’s repairability index, which assigns repairability scores in hopes of shifting buyer behavior. In this global economy, any company that wants to sell its products in France needs to submit its products’ scores on that index. The closest equivalent in the US is the EPEAT Registry, which doesn’t attach so much importance to repairability in its sustainability scores.

Repair advocates focus on more than just consumer technology, too, as they have also highlighted the need to repair John Deere tractors, medical equipment, and more.

**Do people even need the right to repair?**

More and more products aren’t easily repairable. A product may be impossible to open up without destroying it (wireless earbuds are notorious for this, though novel solutions sometimes come up), may have no third-party options for parts (Nintendo was recently sued over “Joy-**Con** drift,” a problem that requires Switch owners to send in their controllers to Nintendo for a fix), or may deny owners the ability to install custom software to extend its life after the company ends support (smart-home devices struggle with this, such as when Sonos tried to **sunset** support for older devices, or when Nest disabled the Revolv Hub). Even **appliances**, long a bastion of repairability, are increasingly utilizing computer chips, becoming potentially more difficult to fix down the road.

Intentionally or not, manufacturers employ all sorts of tricks that make repair difficult, such as using proprietary screws, serializing parts, declining to publish repair documentation, or gluing parts together. Sites like iFixit (which also sells some of our favorite repair tools) have **sprung up** over the years to offer product “teardowns” and documentation for user repair. But a single company or a handful of dedicated YouTube tutorial creators can make only so much documentation to cover the sea of products that exist today.

There is the hope that with increased repairability, the world will see less e-waste. “You can’t make them last if you can’t make them work,” said Gordon-Byrne. “Any time a manufacturer says that they are being good to the environment, and then they r………… to let you fix your stuff, I just cry **foul**.” Nathan Proctor, senior right to repair campaign director at U.S. Public Interest Research Group, a consumer-advocacy group, agrees: “We shouldn’t be recycling usable technology, we should be reusing it. That’s far better for the environment.”

Take Apple as an example of how this kind of thing tends to **play out**. Sure, Apple has the Genius Bar for repairs. But not every city in the country has an Apple Store, and in rural areas driving to one might take hours. After years of **pushback**, in 2019 Apple finally opened its iPhone parts and tools to third-party repair shops (and in 2020 it expanded that to Macs), but Apple continues to make computers that aren’t easily upgradable or repairable by buyers after purchase. Right-to-repair legislation would ensure that at the very least, Apple would be required to make those repair parts and tools, alongside basic documentation, available to everyone.

Apple isn’t the only **offender** here. Wiens points to Samsung as another **culprit**: “If you go to a local repair shop with a cracked S11 and say, ‘Will you fix it?’ they’ll say, ‘Well, we could, but it’s so expensive you don’t want to bother.’” Wiens adds that Samsung also has diagnostic tools that independent repair shops don’t have access to, which gives official repair shops a competitive a………………. .

There’s also ev…………. that when companies want to make something repairable, they can. Wiens points to the Surface Laptop 3, which Microsoft improved in terms of repairability between versions without changing the core design. “They rearranged things inside the product, and they found their way to making a **serviceable** product.”

Buyers have taken for …………. that what they buy can be repaired, but that’s increasingly not the …………. Right-to-repair legislation would est…………. rules that promote repairability practices throughout industries, including consumer technology, agriculture equipment, and medical equipment. By requiring manufacturers to sell replacement parts and make documentation available, such laws would make it easier for people to extend the life of the products they buy.

1. The law, passed in 1975, was created to fix problems as a result of manufacturers using disclaimers on warranties in an unfair or misleading manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)