Reading One
Planned Obsolescence and Our 'Disposable Society'

Too often, the products we buy are designed to be disposable. Whether it's a mobile phone, a pair of earbuds, or a microwave, if an item we are using stops working, it usually gets thrown away. Even if we want to fix it, we often have no ability to do so.

In many cases, companies have intentionally made "in-home" repairs difficult and expensive in order to encourage consumers to buy new products instead of fixing our old ones.

Our society is heavily influenced by both the desire for convenience and by "throwaway culture," in which we buy countless single-use items in disposable packaging and trash even more expensive purchases after limited use.

In the United States, more than 100 billion plastic bottles are sold and more than 14.5 million tons of single-use plastic packaging are created every year. While we are getting somewhat better at recycling paper and plastic, the problem of disposability extends further to high-tech items that contain heavy metals and other hazardous components.

As Madrid-based business reporter Clara Hernanz Lizarraga reported in Bloomberg News on August 28, 2021, "Discarded electronic goods generated an estimated 53.6 million tons of waste in 2019, and only 17% of that was properly recycled. This trash contains heavy metals and compounds including arsenic, lead, mercury, and cadmium, which if not disposed of appropriately can expose communities to the risk of cancer, birth defects and mutations."

The problem of electronic waste is only growing. Writing in The Atlantic in 2016, reporter and financial-services specialist Syed Faraz Ahmed explained about how this problem has changed in the past two decades:

> Electronics have always produced waste, but the quantity and speed of discard has increased rapidly in recent years. There was a time when households would keep televisions for more than a decade. But thanks to changes in technology and consumer demand, there is hardly any device now that persists for more than a couple of years in the hands of the original owner. As per the report of ENDS Europe agency, built-in obsolescence increased the proportions of all units sold to replace defective appliances from 3.5 percent in 2004 to 8.3 percent in 2012. The share of large household appliances that had to be replaced within the first five years grew from 7 percent of total replacements in 2004 to 13 percent in 2013.
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> https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/09/the-global-cost-of-electronic-waste/502019/

This growing problem of waste and throwaway culture did not happen by accident. Corporations have deliberately encouraged disposability in order to sell more products. "Planned obsolescence," a strategy in which producers make goods disposable so that consumers must continue to repurchase new goods,

began in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s, as mass production was becoming popular. It has become more and more prevalent ever since. Ahmed continues:

> Manufacturers have also used software updates to privilege newer models of smartphones and computers, invisibly pressuring consumers to buy new devices just to maintain parity of experience. And companies have also increasingly ended support for older models or the operating systems that run on them. WhatsApp and Facebook, for example, recently announced that they will stop providing support for their apps on certain older models of Blackberry.

> Following the lead set by razor blades, printer manufacturers have realized that they can make more money selling ink and toner than the printer hardware itself. According to a Financial Times report, a gallon of ink for the typical printer costs the consumer around $8,000. But the prices of printers are so low that once their initial ink supply is spent, the consumer is tempted to buy a whole new machine.

> This idea of pushing consumers to buy new items quickly by artificially reducing the lifespan of products is hardly new. In 1924, Phoebus, a cartel between Osram, Phillips, Tungsram, and General Electric, insured that light bulbs did not exceed an expected life span of 1,000 hours. This cartel was dissolved in 1939, when Eastern European manufacturers started producing low-cost bulbs.

> But today, planned obsolescence has broader and more serious consequences. Electronic waste is a global ecological issue. It raises concern about air pollution, water pollution, soil pollution, information security, and even human exploitation.

> https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/09/the-global-cost-of-electronic-waste/502019/

With consumers under pressure to buy the latest models of gadgets and smartphones, and with manufacturers feeding the creation of toxic trash, the consequences of throwaway culture are becoming ever more evident.

For Discussion:

1. What stood out for you in this reading? Why?

2. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?

3. What is "planned obsolescence" and why has it become more prevalent?

4. What are some examples of manufacturers encouraging people to buy new products instead of fixing older ones?

5. Think of instances in your life where you have seen throwaway culture at work. What did you think about this?

6. What steps do you think that we can take as individuals or collectively to address the culture of disposability? What role do you think that government should have in confronting this problem?

Reading Two
Defending Our "Right to Repair"

Around the world, a growing movement known as "right to repair" is challenging throwaway culture and encouraging more sustained relationships with the items we buy.

At both local and federal levels, the movement is advocating for laws to allow consumers to repair their own technological devices, from cars to cell phones, rather than discarding them when they break. As technology reporter Thorin Klosowski explained in a July 2021 article in The New York Times:

> 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.
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> 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), but practically speaking, people are often denied 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**:**
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> - 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.
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> https://www.nytimes.com/wirecutter/blog/what-is-right-to-repair/

Right to repair is a growing movement internationally. European regulators have been leading the charge, implementing rules as early as 2019 that require manufacturers of household appliances such as washing machines, refrigerators, and TVs to make repair manuals and spare parts available to consumers.

The movement has also had some legislative successes in the United States. Twenty-five states are considering right to repair legislation. In June 2021, New York moved a step closer to passing a bill when the state senate approved the Digital Fair Repair Act, which would require manufacturers to make repair manuals and parts available to customers.

The following month, President Joe Biden signed an Executive Order that aims to increase competition and directs the Federal Trade Commission to issue rules supporting independent repair shops.

Kyle Wiens, the founder of a technology repair service IFixit, has described how right to repair can reduce global waste and improve the daily lives of consumers. In a July 13, 2021 op-ed for the Washington Post, Wiens wrote about the recent progress on this front:

> On Friday, President Biden issued a sweeping executive order promising action on various fronts — from drug prices to fees charged by airlines — to improve competition within the American economy. Among the most consequential if often-overlooked issues the order addresses is the "right to repair."
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> Right to repair is a David-vs-Goliath battle. Local repair businesses have been frustrated for years at being shut out from servicing the products we all depend on. Apple, for instance, does not allow independent shops to repair home buttons on iPhones. Nikon has stopped selling service parts to local camera shops, forcing many out of business. John Deere withholds software that farmers need to keep their modern tractors running, making farmers beholden to dealerships even for the most basic fixes. Farmers are so frustrated that they turn to sketchy sources — like Ukrainian firmware companies — for tools to fix their own equipment….
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> The Federal Trade Commission has been investigating anticompetitive repair practices for years, but trade associations have blocked real reforms (often at the state level). A sign that the FTC is getting more aggressive on this issue came in May, when it released a bipartisan report (signed on to by all its commissioners), "Nixing the Fix," that concluded that "there is scant evidence to support manufacturers' justifications for repair restrictions."
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> https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/07/13/biden-ftc-right-to-repair/

Most of the current fights around right to repair are happening at the state level, where corporations are lobbying heavily against proposed legislation. According to U.S. PIRG, a non-profit consumer protection agency, electronic manufacturers including T-Mobile, AT&T, and Tesla have all lobbied against right to repair bills.

In Colorado, where activists are pushing for right to repair legislation, a recent bill was shot down in the state senate. Reporting for Vice, multimedia journalist Matthew Gault outlined the testimony of one individual, Kenny Maestas, who spoke at a March 2021 hearing about how he would benefit from right to repair:

> Maestas, who uses a wheelchair, drove this home in his testimony before the committee. Maestas spent a long time in the hospital and when he came home, his mobility was restricted. An electric wheelchair helped him get around, but it was broken. The right arm of the chair was broken and the battery would no longer hold a charge...
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> Maestas said that the electric wheelchair company had the battery and spare parts on file to fix his chair, but the company's procedure required a technician to first inspect the chair before making a repair. It was another 28 days after the tech first arrived before Maestas was mobile again. It was more than 60 days before his chair was working again.

"It's never appropriate to make a human being with a critical care need wait over two months for a repair that could have been completed in two days," he said. The committee asked Maestas no questions.

https://www.vice.com/en/article/wx8w7b/colorado-denied-its-citizens-the-right-to-repair-after-riveting-testimony

Despite testimony from disability-rights activists, farmers, and environmentalists, only one committee member voted in favor of the bill.

Given the opposition to right to repair by tech companies and their lobbyists, expanded consumer and environmental protections will require ongoing pressure from grassroots campaigns if they are to become law.

For Discussion:

1. What stood out for you in the reading? Why?

2. How much of the material was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?

3. What are the goals of the "right to repair" movement?

4. Have you experienced a product becoming less useful or functional over time? When this happened, did you feel that fixing it was an option? Do you think right to repair protections could have helped you in this instance?

5. Companies that lobby against right to repair say that they should be able to control their intellectual property and that making products easier to fix could make users' data less secure. What do you think about these arguments? How might defenders of right to repair respond?