

Apple and the Right to Repair

The Right to Repair Movement

This case study explores the Right to Repair Movement and its implications, with Apple and the center of our study

Overview

Traditionally, owners of equipment were able to take apart, modify and repair their equipment either by themselves, or at their local repair shops without much hassle. However, in the past decade, manufacturers have increasingly implemented various measures to prevent users from repairing their own products or even getting them repaired at their local shops.

These practices give the consumers limited options in terms of service providers and affordability, thereby hampering consumer freedom. For this reason, a movement called “The Right to Repair Movement” sprung up to combat this issue.

The Right to Repair Movement is a consumer advocacy initiative that seeks to ensure individuals have the ability to repair and modify their own electronic devices and equipment.

Goals of the Movement:

- Legislative Change
- Environmental Sustainability
- Economic Benefits
- Consumer Freedom

How this relates to Apple

The Right to Repair Movement is particularly relevant to Apple, a company often criticized for making its products difficult to repair. While Apple does not outrightly say “Do not repair your own devices or fix them at your local shop”, certain measures they have implemented suggest otherwise.

Apple restricts access to genuine spare parts and repair manuals, making it difficult for consumers and independent repair shops to obtain the necessary components and information needed for repairs. The company has also faced criticism for deliberately designing products that are difficult to repair by anyone other than their authorized technicians. For instance, Apple uses proprietary screws in iPhones and MacBooks, which when introduced in 2009, had no corresponding screwdrivers available on the market (Madway, 2011). Other design choices like the use of intricate internal layouts, strong adhesives, etc, contribute to non-repairability.

Apple has also faced criticism for its practice of parts pairing, which is a system where the

practice of matching a specific part (e.g. a screen) to a unique ID linked to the device's serial number, such that replacing that part could make the device lose some loosely-related functionality. (Wiens, 2024). Apple however argues that this is necessary to make repairs easier, provide device security and maintain quality control (Roth,2024).

These measures force consumers to go to the official Apple store for even the most minimal repairs, where they face exorbitant prices, leading some to simply replace their devices entirely. Consumers have limited options in terms of service providers and affordability, thereby hampering consumer freedom.

In response to pressure from the Right to Repair Movement and legislative actions, Apple introduced an Independent Repair Program. This program provides some independent repair shops with access to genuine Apple parts, tools, and manuals. However, the program has been criticized for its stringent requirements, high costs, and the limited range of parts available. Signing up is a cumbersome process involving a pre-screening application, a non-disclosure agreement, a credit application, and an extensive agreement. Apple also reserves the right to reject applications without explanation. Additionally, the program allows Apple to audit participating shops at any time, even up to five years after they leave the program.

Apple also launched a Self-Service Repair Program, which allows consumers to purchase genuine parts and tools directly from Apple. While this program is a step in the right direction, it is often expensive and complicated. Consumers are required to navigate detailed repair manuals and may have to rent specialized tools, adding to the overall cost and complexity of repairs. For example, the first step to fixing the battery of a MacBook Pro involves reading a 162-page manual which makes the system look more intimidating to repair, especially because people have done it in the past in less time than the manual provides. This also, quite unusually, instructs users to replace the entire top case and keyboard to replace a battery.

Additionally, programs like the Independent Repair Program, Self-Service Program and even AppleCare are largely found in the Global North, which leaves customers outside of these regions with fewer and more expensive legitimate options.

Apple's lack of support for repairability is not friendly to the environment. Apple contributes to a culture of disposability where consumers are more inclined to replace devices rather than repair them, which increases the level of e-waste in the world. Relating to the environment as well, Apple has recently been accused by the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) of using minerals illegally exported from the DRC for their products. Lawyers of the DRC sent a letter to Tim Cook, Apple's CEO, claiming that their electronics and gadgets are "tainted by the blood of the Congolese people" (Acton & Schipani, 2024).

Meanwhile, According to Beckett-Hester (2021), Apple has one of the most aggressive environment-policies in the electronic industry. Apple aims to be carbon neutral by 2030 and highlights methods such as a recycling programme that they have been implementing to achieve this goal. These claims

are considered greenwashing by many. An example is the removal of the power brick and earphones from the packaging with the release of the iPhone 12. This has been interpreted as a cost saving method for Apple, rather than a genuine environmental effort as consumers still have to purchase these accessories in their own packaging.

Counter Arguments against Right to Repair

At first glance, the concept of the right-to-repair poses no harm. However, with the evolution of technology and its intricacies, critics and manufacturers against these rights have raised legitimate concerns.

- User safety
- Threat to environment
- Consumer Cost Increase
- Consumer security and privacy
- Innovation and intellectual property

Ethical Considerations (IDK if to include the answers, you can determine how it looks when you put it together on the slides)

Should consumers have the right to repair? To what extent do you agree with the goals of the Movement?

Do Apple's repair initiatives count as malicious compliance? Why?

Is Apple's approach practicing planned obsolescence? If so, is it consistent, in this case, with the mutuality paradigm?

Is Apple's claim of protecting intellectual property, amongst other things, reason enough to justify the high cost of repairs faced by customers?

What duties does Apple have towards the environment? Based on the information presented, have they performed these duties conscientiously?