# **A Qualitative Look Into Repair Practices**

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# WHAT IS THE RIGHT TO REPAIR?

A movement hinged upon fighting for the ability to fix, modify, and tinker freely with the goods that are rightfully ours as consumers and businesspeople.

#### **Movement Goals**

• To regain complete authority over our technological goods (phones, laptops, appliances, medical equipment like ventilators, agricultural equipment like tractors, etc.) and to restore the repair industry to its former glory.

• To increase fair repair accessibility for people of all economic, social, and cultural backgrounds, thus increasing healthy market activity, and empowering and including consumers of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

 To minimize (e-)waste by extending the useful life of products, thus keeping them out of landfills for longer.





## i. Design

The way in which various products are designed; their quality, durability and/or longevity or lack thereof, certain design decisions that were made to ensure their ease or difficulty of repair, whether they are digital or analog, their sustainable or unsustainable nature, and other stylistic choices that were implemented during the creation process.

• **How participants discussed it:** the degree to which they were able to tinker with their products, how design affected that greatly, the degree to which the design obstructed repair and how this was viewed as a manipulative money-making tactic, admonishments of current design (overcomputerization, not durable or sustainable, overly expensive), durable design of the past vs. fragile design today, etc.

"[...] any time there is some kind of legislation that is tabled, **industry lobbyists use that as an opportunity**, or they come in and they do a lot of internal lobbying to essentially **kill those bills**, and a lot of that lobbying includes, I don't wanna call it misinformation but just I guess **education on their end**, **on how those bills would affect their industries**, and they often have more access to these politicians than we do. So there are **a lot of misconceptions around Right to Repair** and how it would affect for example, intellectual property or even... Or like consumer access to some products. And so we are afraid that a lot of that **misinformation is still out there in political circles**."

• **Codes:** law, economic/business strategy, informational asymmetry. social impediments.

#### **Research Goals**

• To build upon last year's research by moving beyond the traditional scope of repair and examining the Right to Repair movement from a smaller, more personal lens, this time focusing on how 6 categorical repair impediments (dubbed by Dr. Alissa Centivany) continuously inhibit repair and affect repair practices, and how this has larger implications (environmental, economic, social, etc.) on ourselves, our objects, and our world.

• To demonstrate how the lack of adequate repair options, as created by the 6 impediments, affects everyone (and everything), not simply those working in "directly" implicated industries (agriculture, healthcare, automotive, military, technology, government, etc.), and to get a better insight on contemporary repair practices and how they've changed due to such impediments.

• To reveal the extent of our diminished freedom as consumers and owners, which has stemmed from increased corporate greed and lack of governmental regulations with regards to repair and the environment.

• Ultimately, to signal the critical nature of repair and why everyone should care about it.

**CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVES:** common themes and ways in which the Right to Repair movement has been discussed in mainstream media and academia within the past few years; additionally, the six ways in which repair is and has been impeded (Centivany, 2020).

## ii. Law

One of the biggest impediments; legal constraints over repair often put in place by lawmakers and manufacturers such as digital locks in the form of software codes, for example.

• **How participants discussed it:** projections of where people think the movement could go and look like and whether any legislation will be passed/tabled, corporations and their ties to law, lawmakers' disregard for the movement, how corporations block meaningful legislation and prohibit consumers from legally repairing and tinkering with their own stuff, why the movement is bigger in the US than Canada, etc.

## iii. Economic/Business Strategy

The manipulative ways in which manufacturers obstruct repair and tout replacement by making repair as expensive, infuriating, and time-consuming as possible for consumers, in order to ensure hegemony over the market and continue generating revenue.

• **How participants discussed it:** how modern capitalism necessitates constant consumption and thus the greedy, planet-destroying tactics that manufacturers have perfected and continue to use, how manufacturers make it difficult to fix owned equipment, how expensive ownership, repair, and replacement have become and how consumers and workers have thus been put at a disadvantage, how manufacturers have made replacement first nature and repair second, etc.

## iv. Material Asymmetry

"[R]epairing something is a way of subverting the system. Repairing your broken hair dryer is a revolutionary act in the world today, actually [...] I think it's a form of dissent. I think it's also a form of prefiguring a new society."

• Codes: social impediments.

"So it had a gearhead, that grease was degrading or something, and it was spilling out, having brown ooze all over her thing, so she had bought food grade grease, **she had the video, she had the food processor, but was really afraid to open it.** But **I wasn't**."

• Codes: social impediments.

"This is a trend that has been coming in very slowly and crept in, with every new model there's fewer pieces that are really repairable [...] For the most part most appliances are still repairable, but slowly they're becoming less and less repairable, so it's something that most people don't really realize is an issue [...] public communications has been our biggest barrier, actually demonstrating that it is a growing issue and even if it doesn't affect you personally right now, it definitely will affect you in the future."

• **Codes:** informational asymmetry, material asymmetry, social impediments, design, economic/business strategy.

#### Brief Methodology

Participants recruited by Dr.
Centivany in early 2020

 Combination of cold calling, emailing, purposeful sampling, snowball recruitment

Participants given informed consent documents upon agreeing to participate in the study to read and sign prior to interviews *Interview dates:* 21 Feb 2020 - 13 Aug 2020 over Zoom

completely anonymized for participant comfort and safety
12 interview transcripts selected for research paper

Ethics approval.

Interviews

 Placed transcripts into a Google Sheets document, coded them for 6 categorical imperatives by sorting important quotes into certain categories alongside a research team

#### Study Limitations

- Small sample size
- 12 participants
- Mostly from Canada and the US
  Not diverse enough, thus only representative of a small population
- Time constraints

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- 16-week internship period
- Limited by those who agreed

Despite the limitations, it should be noted that this is preliminary research and that data aggregation and paper writing remain ongoing, so the results will only strengthen from here.

"Even if you buy a new Dodge pickup truck, which every farmer has one, bottom line is, you can hardly do anything, repair work on the engines and the computerization of the whole thing. So, it's gonna be a tough go for the individual farmer to actually have a machine that needs repair, and how do you go about it? Well, sure, there are online maintenance manuals and all sorts of things, but will they sell you the part from the dealership? And sometimes they don't." Artificial scarcity engineered by manufacturers that prohibits consumers and third party technicians from accessing physical materials (tools, manuals, parts, etc.) needed to diagnose and repair their products.

• **How participants discussed it:** workers' and consumers' inability to access important parts and manuals needed to repair their products due to blockades like copyright law, money, or outright refusal from manufacturers, the newfound predominance of leasing vs buying, having to make one's own tools, open source materials, etc.

## v. Informational Asymmetry

The deliberate newfound lack of information – whether in the form of knowledge, manuals, schematics, and more – communicated to or made available to consumers and third party technicians to be able to help them conduct repairs.

• **How participants discussed it:** manufacturers' and politicians' deliberate spreading of misinformation about the Right to Repair movement, consumers' and even politicians' general unawareness about the movement and their repair rights, people's lost repair skills and lack of knowledge of basic repair techniques, etc.

## vi. Social Impediments

One of the more fluid and complicated categories, as well as the least researched impediment. Attempts to respond to the question, "When repair is available and affordable, why don't we do it?" Can refer to our relationships with repair, or lack thereof.

"I think that everybody should know how to use a screw... Like be able to hang a painting on the wall, [...] to change a tyre, [...] to fix a hole in their sock. All those sort of basic things that I feel like we used to be taught, and maybe we're not being taught as much anymore, because we live in a fairly disposable culture and a service culture, and we either just get rid of it, or we ask somebody else to deal with it [....] also, our stuff is not made as well, which... People used to fix stuff 'cause it was made well. So that's a struggle people have."

• Codes: social impediments.

"[I]t's seen as **bad work**. We **don't value it anymore.** It's something I **never considered** [...] It **wasn't an option**."

 Codes: social impediments, informational asymmetry, economic/ business strategy.

## Next Research Steps

Continued research on the movement and its progress as the year ends.
Code more interview transcripts to increase the study's sample size.
Finish writing the paper (est. date: Sep/Oct 2022).

to participate (busy schedules, no response etc.) • Those with professional backgrounds in repair, law, and/or agriculture were more likely to come forward and share their thoughts and experiences, limiting the study by having a more 'homogenous'

perspective/background

• **Codes:** design, economic/business strategy, material asymmetry, informational asymmetry, social impediments.

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Western Libraries Western StudentExperience • How participants discussed it: how repair has become a lost art because of internal and external barriers like lack of repair education and encouragement to go into the trades as well as manufacturers' manipulative tactics, positive and negative feelings toward repair, childhood experiences with repair, etc.

"It's very dangerous to think that our individual actions can have this massive global impact. Yes, I think we should do... Make individual changes where we can, but the real changes that need to happen are at an institutional and a political level."

Codes: law, economic/business strategy, informational asymmetry, social impediments.

"The manufacturer should invest more in turning their manufacturing strategy from mass manufacturing of low quality products into less mass production [...] of higher quality products, and they absolutely can sell them for higher prices. And people... The consumer would accept them because they lasted longer. They will last longer."

Codes: design, economic/business strategy, material asymmetry, social impediments.

- Potentially publish the paper in a scholarly journal once it's been edited.
- Attend local and international repair workshops and conferences.

 Reach out to more people interested in speaking about their experiences with repair for potential interviews.

# **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

• Threats to repair affect everyone and everything. No one and nothing is excluded from the consequences of not having the ability to repair our things.

 Since corporations took complete authority over repair, profit has taken precedence over goods that were designed to last forever. This has affected us economically, psychologically, socially, and environmentally.

Consumers have slowly been conditioned into viewing replacement as the only
option given the lack of product durability and good marketing schemes; rampant (over)
consumption is a product of modern capitalism and manufacturers' greed.

• Repair is better for our economies, our health, and the environment. Having the right to repair is essential to maintaining healthy markets and including all consumers, controlling or slowing down climate change and global warming, and minimizing e-waste and its negative health effects.

• Fixing, reusing, and reselling more goods ultimately means that we throw away less, which keeps more products out of waste streams, especially in developing countries.

 People still want to repair their things, but they increasingly cannot. They also seem to prefer to reuse old objects, but this is becoming harder and harder.

 We have the power to enact change, but governments and corporations must do their part.

This poster is based on a working research paper. See also: "The Right to Repair: (Re)building a better future" (2021)



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