

With Amazon destroying millions of unused items every year, what are we going to do about electronic waste?

In the second part of The Repairability Report, a four-part article series from Maddyne UK and France, we dissect the UK's new proposals for tackling e-waste - asking whether, with giants like Amazon to contend with, they will be enough.

Temps de lecture : minute

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An *investigation by ITV News* has revealed the online marketplace is destroying unsold or returned products like laptops, headphones and TVs at mass scale. At just one of its 24 UK fulfillment centres, Amazon is sending up to 200,000 items a week to landfill, according to an anonymous former employee. Undercover footage of the 'destruction zone' at the Dunfermline Warehouse shows drills, extension cables and shavers amongst piles of indiscriminate electronics.

Though Amazon claims to be working towards a goal of zero product disposal, with no items sent to landfill in the UK, ITV's coverage tells a different story.

Philip Dunne, Chairman of the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC), *told ITV*: "If true, it is a scandal that Amazon have got to start to address." Amazon had, he said, appeared before the committee last year proclaiming its sustainability credentials.

Amazon's conduct proves a disjunct between PR and progress in Big Tech.

The corporation is not acting illegally, making it clear the UK needs tighter restrictions on electronic waste. If not, this kind of activity is sure to continue; there's an evident lack of will to self-regulate on environmental matters.

Commenting on the investigation, a spokesperson for Boris Johnson said, "we are looking at the regulations to see how we can increase reusing and recycling for things like electrical goods."

What are these regulations?

A sustainable e-waste strategy will need to address all stages of the product life cycle - from manufacture to repairs to disposal. It will have to tackle the laissez-faire approach to waste taken by corporates like Amazon head on.

A collection of measures were actually announced back in *March*, to great acclaim. The UK government was praised for lining up a 'right to repair' law and other measures against premature obsolescence (when companies design appliances to have short lifespans). But as the scale of the issue becomes clear, it's time to look beyond the hype.

Over the past few months, *Maddyness* has spoken to e-waste experts about how the UK's new measures stack up.

Ugo Vallauri from sustainable electronics social enterprise The Restart Project agrees that the world's tech giants won't regulate themselves. "We surveyed people who spend time in repair cafes, asking them about the barriers they face trying to extend the life of electronics", he tells me. "We were told that Apple glues and solders parts together on their laptops, which makes repairing them very difficult. They also charge very high fees to repair their products."

“This trend, which goes against a long history of engineering in the UK, needs to stop.”



Photo by Mark Phillips

Material Focus has seen some positives from the minor restrictions already placed on manufacturers. While The Restart Project teaches people how to repair their old kit, Material Focus is focused on growing the number and type of electronic recycling points available to

consumers.

“The campaign is funded by producers of electrical appliances”, says Kate Hinton from Material Focus. “The UK government sets annual targets for the recycling of all waste electricals, including small electricals. If producers of electrical appliances don’t meet this target, then they contribute towards a fund, which pays for a range of activities including communications, behaviour change activities, increasing recycling collection points and technical research.”

But there is only so much they can do when big players aren’t cooperative. Vallauri was disappointed by the government’s March announcement – “only a small step as opposed to the amount of change that we are after” – and is calling for a ‘real right to repair’.



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[Electronic waste arrives in Africa in the form of ‘donations’](#)

A PR stunt

First off, he says, “What's happening in the UK has been communicated as this ‘big push’. The reality is, the UK, back in 2018, approved - as part of the EU - this package of so-called ecodesign regulation for some products, including washing machines, dishwashers, fridges and electronic screens, which include televisions.”

“This came into effect in Europe on March 1st this year.”

“What the UK is doing is taking the EU legislation that it had already approved, while still part of the EU, and bringing it to the UK.”

“It's not doing anything new as part of this move and in fact it is doing it a few months after it's already coming to fruition in the rest of Europe.”

Getting into the nitty gritty, the rules on spare parts and energy efficiency only apply to very few product categories. Tablets, smartphones and computers are not covered. They also don't apply to products people already own. The spare parts and repair manuals that *are* available will likely only be accessed by professionals. “Officially, people like you and I might be able to access them - if a manufacturer decides to make them available”, says Vallaur. “But they're not required by the legislation to make them available.”

There are some high notes, such as the number of years (even after taking a product off the market) that parts for fixing it will be available for. And of course, it's a big positive that the UK and the rest of Europe are beginning to take electronic waste - the world's fastest growing waste stream - seriously. Over in France, they have taken things to the next

level with a Repairability Index – a scoring system for how easy or difficult electronics are to repair.

“We think the Repair Index is a great initiative”, says Vallauri. “It's not perfect, but it starts forcing manufacturers to be more transparent about what they commit to. In general, this move allows for a discussion and a shift; it's no longer about 'is it possible to have a repair index?', but 'is it possible to make it even better?'”



Unsplash © Killian Seiler

A real right to repair

Now that the UK is out of the EU, it should be doing more than resting on the laurels of what was achieved before its exit. We can aim for a world-leading electronic waste strategy. Achieving this, a spokesperson for the

Environmental Audit Committee tells me, will be a question of striking a balance between “making it easier and cheaper for consumers to get their Electrical and Electronic products repaired, while ensuring health and safety, and... the interests of manufacturers.”

At the end of the product life cycle, the spokesperson adds, “There must be a clearly defined and communicated long-term pathway, with milestones, showing when and how e-waste treatment centres must improve their recycling of e-waste to capture as many materials as possible and remove toxic chemicals.”

Vallauri has a suite of recommendations too. He feels access to spare parts, repair manuals and software updates should be for everyone, not just professionals. But “there is one thing that's really key and that's not targeted in any regulation yet, which has to do with making repair affordable”, he concludes.

Price and accessibility is the clincher; a lot of people aren't interested in repairing their devices because the parts are just far too expensive. In the words of the EAC, a huge barrier to good practice is “the cost and convenience of replacing smaller items... compared to getting an item repaired”, alongside “consumer preferences and attitudes not favouring repair”.

Despite suggestions to the contrary, we are moving too slowly towards a circular economy for our electronic devices. There has been progress, but little “clarity and commitment” about when we can expect a *real* repairability system.

“There's been too much optimism even in the way the media, the mainstream media has reported on this issue of the right to repair coming to the UK”, confirms Vallauri. “It's really important to understand that the reality of what people experience on the ground is not going to change

very, very soon in any way.”

The Restart Project is pushing for “something that really puts people and planet first, and doesn’t just tick a box and move on, co-opting the meaning of right to repair.” Sign the petition [here](#).

This is the second part of The Repairability Report, a four-part article series from Maddyne UK and France on the mounting problem of electronic waste. Having started at the end of the product life cycle, we’ll be soon be turning our heads to its beginning. We’ll be looking at new policies in the UK and France, and how we can urge Big Tech to take on extended producer responsibility.

Article by Florence Wildblood