Community repair: a pop-up alternative to the throwaway society

This item was submitted to Loughborough University's Institutional Repository by the/an author.


Additional Information:

- This is an Open Access Article. It is published by The Conversation Trust under the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Licence (CC BY-ND 4.0). Full details of this licence are available at: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/. The final published version is available at https://theconversation.com/community-repair-a-pop-up-alternative-to-the-throwaway-society-75821

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/36331

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: The Conversation Trust (UK)

Rights: This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/

Please cite the published version.
Community repair: a pop-up alternative to the throwaway society
Christine Cole
April 24, 2017

A not-so-quiet repair revolution is taking place in communities across Britain. Consumers, fed up with having to throw away broken phones, toasters and other appliances, are instead meeting to learn how to repair them and to extend the lifetime of their products. These repair “pop-up parties”, where like-minded people can improve or learn new skills in a supportive environment, can prevent still-useful products from ending up in the bin, while saving money.

Advances in technology and new applications, combined with faster product obsolescence, means that electrical and electronic equipment make up one of the fastest growing waste streams in the world. The growing demand for these products is also driving unprecedented levels of resource extraction to keep up with increased rates of manufacturing of everyday goods – something that the planet can hardly support.

The number of electrical appliances and devices in UK households tripled between 1970 and 2002 and it continues to grow – the average household now owns around 41 electrical items. Many products develop simple faults which are challenging for the amateur to repair, resulting in replacement products being purchased and equipment with small faults being disposed of. For many consumers, repair is now only an option for high cost items such as cars and personal computers, or for household fixtures such as heating systems – washing machines, kettles and toasters are easier just to throw away.

The ability to repair goods is key to maintaining the functionality of products and delaying, or avoiding, their disposal. The government recognises the value of repair as part of a waste reduction strategy, and the Welsh and Scottish governments have also signalled strong backing for practical action that encourages a circular economy. In Sweden, there are plans to reduce the VAT on repair work from 25% to 12%, and in France there are penalties for “planned obsolescence”, intentionally producing goods with short lives. Germany and Spain have also been looking at the issue.

Restarts and pop-ups

Community-based organisations are providing innovative approaches to the repair of a variety of products including clothing and electrical equipment. Access to information, spare parts and tools is available on websites like iFixit, which publishes guides that teach people “how to fix almost anything” and invites users to create new ones.

The London-based Restart Project is a community-based repair initiative that runs a forum for motivated individuals to attempt repairs that extend the working lifetime of
a variety of items, concentrating primarily on electrical and electronic equipment, and promotes awareness of recycling routes for items they can’t fix.

Restart also arranges pop-up events, where members of the public can take along broken electrical items and attempt to repair them with some support. Restart do not charge a membership fee, and admission to the events they organise is also free. Their aim is simply to enable repair to help extend the lifetime of electrical and electronic equipment and reduce the number of these items that become waste. Restart’s volunteers act as “repair coaches”.

They are also social gatherings, so even if repairs are unsuccessful, participants are still happy to go along and have a go.

Restart also acts as an education tool: through a variety of media channels they distribute information and raise awareness about the environmental impacts of end-of-life products and signpost those with unsuccessful repairs to recycling schemes. Some local authorities have also shown support for these initiatives.

**Extending the network**

Despite the good work being done, the repair network is complex and fragmented – there could be more of them, more widely located, and better known to consumers. Some consumers lack the skills, knowledge or confidence to attempt repairs, even when the resources are available. In a recent study conducted in partnership with The Restart Project, we asked participants at pop-up repair events about their previous experiences of repair. We also asked them about their recycling behaviours and their experiences at the pop-ups. Over half the participants had previously attempted to repair items on their own with different levels of success.

Confidence appears to play an important role in willingness to attempt repairs. It’s often easy to learn how to repair and purchase the tools and parts online, but the compact design of electricals and electronics often makes it an unforgiving task. Pop-up repair events offer a supportive environment in which you can receive help and support completing repairs, building your confidence.

Participants also described a lack of trust in commercial repair services with nearly half of the participants unable to name a repairer they trusted. Several mentioned that the perceived cost of a repair would discourage them from using local, paid-for repair services.

Informal community-based enterprises such as The Restart Project appear ideally placed to develop local networks and respond to the gap in trust.

We also identified that participants were less likely to recycle their electrical items than other waste such as paper, glass and tins. This is a problem because electrical items contain materials which require large energy inputs to create and transport. Nevertheless, pop-up repair events may be able to encourage correct disposal of broken and unwanted household items by telling people how best to dispose of them.
Pop-up repair events, such as those organised by Restart, have the potential to reinvigorate our enthusiasm for repair.