The Right To Repair

It is greatly appreciated that the Productivity Commission is undertaking the review of 'right to repair' in Australia. This is an important issue that if adequately addressed will be able to reduce cost and waste in society.

People were once considered to be citizens, but with the rise and rise of Capitalism we are now referred to as 'consumers'. This is as if our purpose in life is to simply consume what is produced by Capitalism so the Capitalist system may make a profit. We are becoming ever more subservient to this system, rather than this system being subservient to for the benefit of people and society. The system is broken and the tail is clearly wagging the dog.

The situation is is exasperated in mature industries that are functioning with high levels of competition. This leads to many desperate and unsavoury practices the ever more desperate bid to maximise profit as if that is all that matters. We need to decide what kind of society and world we want to live in which is why balancing the profit motive with social and environmental concerns would be the best way forward. Almost all of the issues we are facing today such as Climate Change, Biodiversity loss and environmental toxicity are all related to our consumer led and profit supercharged society. Addressing repair-ability and right to repair aspects is just one small aspect of the overall problem.

There are many examples already submitted outlining shoddy practice across industry. This includes the AG industry, tech industry, auto and many general consumer products. The examples that follow may not be strictly related to the right to repair, but it is an interrelated problem associated with the extreme drive for profit we see today.

Microsoft Windows

Many people depend on Microsoft Windows software to conduct their lives or their businesses. It has in many ways become critical infrastructure as much software that has been developed, that people have invested in or committed to learning is only available on Windows.
For example the forced "quality and security" updates imposed by Microsoft. This causes many problems mainly due to unexpected system restarts, or even prolonged updates that keep the system offline for extended periods. This is a significant "right to repair" issue as currently MS is the only vendor that is able to perform this system level maintenance. (I would argue that people should just abandon MS (and Apple) with FOSS, but I also understand this is difficult if not impossible for many people and businesses.)
So here we have a critical piece of infrastructure used by millions but they have no meaningful opportunity to maintain the system "quality and security" outside of MSoft. It may be argued that MS does not charge for this, but they do with their licence fees. There is also a significant conflict of interest inherent to this situation. MS provides the maintenance and upgrades (which are completely opaque), but then only gets paid if and when you buy a new system. So they have no incentive to maintain an older machine but at the same time have a secret mechanism to artificially cause said machine to slow down, or stop working altogether. So are they maintaining / repairing the operating system or are they sabotaging the performance somehow? There is no way to know!
There is a solution to this problem and it would be for Microsoft to be forced to release the source code for Windows 7. If this was the case then the community at large would be able to repair (update, maintain, improve) the software. It would introduce some real competition into the market which would drive innovation and productivity and reduce costs for the consumer. See the Linux distribution timeline available online to get an idea of what the "non-professional" community can produce in terms of innovation and diversity.

All of these issues above impact on the repair-ability of the product directly or indirectly. The consumer is getting ripped off and has little control.

Apple

Apples lust for adhesive, proprietary screws and throttling software is legend. Apple is also transitioning from Intel to their own proprietary chip. This will prevent consumers from having the choice to re-purpose older hardware that is still working, but has unsupported software. Being unable to install an operating system of choice on the hardware you have purchased is a violation of the right to repair. It will result in ever more market power and control by Apple and ever more mountains of e-waste. Perhaps consumers are to blame for buying into a system that is essentially a digital gaol. However this may be difficult to determine at first. The remedy would be consumer guarantees for repair-ability, parts and information availability and especially a "repair-ability" score at point of sale.

Productivity Loss

Robert Solo once said "You can see the computer age everywhere but in the productivity statistics." Business and societal productivity is also reduced by this constant barrage of upgrades, forced updates and changes. Computers are not really changing that much but they "require" constant "repair", update etc to keep them going.
There is certainly a benefit to ICT, but much of that benefit is being eroded due to the over hyped expectations of the industry along with their ability to control the software and repairability. If computers were more reliable with less interference and repairable and lasted longer and if the software was made to be less expensive then perhaps we would see better productivity. In other words we would probably achieve the same or more output with lower ICT costs.

Automobiles

Unlike the tech industry, the automobile industry has been in long run equilibrium and thus is very competitive, and generally very low margin. This is the case despite the fact that modern cars are quite complex and have many proprietary elements to them.
Automobiles however are a very good example of repairable items. Not to mention the fact they are highly recycled.
This may be set to change as the industry is going through a major (and long overdue) transition from ICE to electric drive. This could end up being a beneficial to society and the environment, but it will require vigilance to ensure this capitalistic industry does not co-opt the transition in a tech industry style makeover.
The problem with electric vehicles for the car industry is that the mechanical complexity of the vehicle will reduce by probably an order of magnitude. The loss of the ICE powertrain will eliminate not only a significant selling point but the main reason for servicing and the main (very expensive) component that wears out. Servicing is currently one way car manufactures make money. The electric drive system could easily be designed to operate with very little or no intervention for 1M km. The battery will also not require any ongoing service. All that is left is replacing the rubber from time to time. So how will the industry respond? By dragging feet in the first place, but then perhaps by embracing a business model like Tesla, based on software which will be allow the kind of control over the obsolescence of the product customers that Microsoft and Apple currently have. If the car industry goes down the path of some in the AG industry with serviceable, unrepeatable (by third party) products then again society and the environment will suffer for the benefit only of greed and profit.

Solar PV systems

A vast amount of electronic hardware and battery systems have been sold in the past 20 years and will continue to increase. This is another area that we will could see mountains of ewaste without careful regulation. In fact this is already happening.
Items like PV inverters should be repairable at the component level. Are they being designed for this or simply for the lowest upfront cost? A green revolution it will be not if we do not have repairable technology.

Proprietary Technology

Another way to protect profitability but hurt repair-ability is to use proprietary technologies in cases where it is not necessary.
For example, cordless power tools typically all use 18V Lithium Ion battery packs. The technology is really the same, but the interfaces are different. This increases the cost of the batteries and makes them less economical to repair. This may also increase the cost of the tools themselves because it creates mini monopolies within the segment by locking in consumers to one brand once they have bought the batteries. This means multiple small independent market segments which makes spare parts and repair (of the related tools) more difficult. Therefore sometimes the repair-ability is not just directly related to the item itself but how a market segment is able to use necessary proprietary approaches.
The same problem will probably occur with BEV's, they may all be using the same technology, which should be inter-operable but will not be made so in order for manufacturers to control the repair or parts supply.
In the past there seemed to be more emphasis on common standards which would lead to greater ability to repair.

Conclusion

Above are a few examples with repair-ability of products in our modern age. The drive for maximising profit leads to unethical practices which are harming society and the environment. In particular, the opportunity for profiteering with software driven products is huge. Ultimately we need wide ranging legislation to control the destructive impulses of this system. Having products that are repairable and also having the right to repair is but one part of that bigger picture and perhaps a good place to start.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on this issue.

Regards,

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