

Right to Repair is not just for the motor industry

As South Africa is preparing for implementation of an automotive industry code that supports the Right to Repair (R2R), the European Union (EU), United States (US) and other countries are starting to implement R2R in other industries.



Gunther Schmitz, chairman of Right to Repair South Africa (R2RSA).

“The concept and principles of R2R started in the motor industry more than 20 years ago in the EU and US. The same concepts and principles are now being implemented in many industries from computers and cell phones to washing machines and agricultural machinery,” says Gunther Schmitz, chairman of the Section-21 company, Right to Repair South Africa (R2RSA).

The growing inability of the consumer to repair products is leading to increased waste with electronic waste now one of the most rapidly growing parts of the waste stream. The UN estimates that 60 million tons of electronic waste is generated each year. Americans throw out 416,000 smartphones every day.

To deal with this growing concern the European Parliament has approached the EU Commission, member states and producers with several recommendations. One includes that consumers should have the option of going to an independent repairer. Technical, safety or software solutions which prevent repairs from being performed, other than by approved firms or bodies, should be discouraged. Other points include those essential components, such as batteries and LEDs, should not be fixed into products, unless for safety reasons; and spare parts which are indispensable for the proper and safe functioning of the goods should be made available at a price commensurate with the nature and lifetime of the product.

In the US, until 2013, carmakers routinely kept vital diagnostic and repair tools out of the hands of independent workshops, despite protests from the industry and attempts at legislation to make the practice illegal. Massachusetts then passed automotive right-to-repair legislation, and within a few months carmakers agreed to use the state's rules as a national standard. This change is said to have set a benchmark for other industries.

"While R2R was originally driven by independent workshops and parts manufacturers we now see consumer rights groups and environmental organisations supporting the Right to Repair. This confirms that the positive benefits for the consumer, the environment and the economy are being acknowledged globally and across industries. It also supports R2RSA's view that the right to repair is a basic right in any economy and is becoming the international norm, not the exception, as manufacturers and dealers in SA would like us to believe," he says.

"The reality is that if we don't see change in the motor industry, we could be facing a time, in the not so distant future, where consumers who can't afford to have their cars repaired at a dealer will simply not be able to have their cars repaired. This is because affordable independent repairers won't have the information, tools or training to repair cars as more and more components become coded," explains Schmitz. "And what will happen to these vehicles that, simply, the owner can't afford to repair? Sold, scrapped, who knows..."

He says this is why the Right to Repair campaign is calling for transparency when it comes to access to information, tools and training so the aftermarket can be well-equipped to service cars in or out of warranty. "Independent workshops are more than happy to buy this information at a reasonable price.

Right now, however, this is not an option in South Africa. In Europe, for example, this information is housed in a data cloud and workshops have access through an interface on a subscription basis. The information also includes essential service information from the OEMs so mechanics have all the tips at their disposal."

"While R2RSA is focusing on the automotive repair market, we embrace the right to repair conceptually across other industries as we believe that this will be positive for the consumer in terms of choice and will lead to a more competitive economy."

Schmitz says the code of conduct, due to be published soon, will encourage much-needed progress.

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