

E-waste: France leads the way for the European Union

In the third part of The Repairability Report, a four-part article series from Maddyness UK and France, we look at the legislations made in France to limit e-waste and become the leader in the European Union.

Translation of an article published on [Maddyness](#)

According to a report by the UN, there were over 53.6M tonnes of electronics and electronic products created in the world, meaning that these products became the primary source of waste in the world. In France this equates to 20 kilos of electronic waste created per year per inhabitant. The causes: smartphones, laptops, tablets, headphones and the fact that users change them (too) often. And that's not to mention the increasingly intelligent and connected fridges and other perhaps unnecessary "tech" products.

Unwittingly, COVID-19 has exacerbated the problem. "There has been a surge in the purchase of electronic products needed to equip remote workers." States Pierre-Emmanuel Saint-Esprit, cofounder and Managing Director of [Zack](#), a company that specialises in the recycling of electronic products. In a number of countries, the time has come for legislation. France has decided to take action without waiting for the European Union to act by passing a law on the 10th February 2020 that relates to waste, the circular economy and especially e-waste (D3E). The bill was subject to a number of amendments, 1554 to be precise, and has evolved into a law with a clear focus on re-use.

Educating consumers

At the heart of this new law is the reparability index, which came into effect on the first of July, and gives consumers a simple colour-coded ranking system to know how easy it is to repair a piece of technology. At present, only 5 product categories are affected by this: smartphones, laptops, washing machines, lawnmowers and televisions. The rating is *based on a number of criterias*: How easy it is to disassemble the object? (are the tools easily available? Can the fixtures be removed simply?) Is information widely available? (Video tutorials, instruction manuals and plans) Removable parts (how long do they last and how much do they cost to replace?)

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When the rating is provided by the manufacturer, “the details are verified by the Competition Directorate General” confirms Marta de Cidrac, Senator for Yvelines responsible for the law on circular economy. The details of the ranking for each product is available to all at this [*website*](#). “The goal of this index is to facilitate access to information with clear visuals, but the Climate Law which has been adopted has further strengthened the system by making the details of the ranking accessible” continues the senator.

A first step towards a durability index

The objective is clear, reduce the infamous e-waste (D3E) using gentle methods. “This scheme put the responsibility on the manufacturers who will need to become transparent and responsible” suggests the senator. There is no question of using the carrot and stick approach with the introduction of a new tax or a ban on the marketing of products that receive a bad rating – a suggestion proposed by Hubert Wulfranc and André Chassaigne that was rejected. The government hopes that by making the consumers responsible for choosing the most durable products and the manufacturers keen to obtain the best rating, the new law will be a success. Although Pierre-Emmanuel Saint-Esprit sees this index as “a very good idea”, he worries that “it will do little to compete with the consumers desire for a new iPhone” even if it is more

complex to repair. “In retail, a number of brands have already launched initiatives around repairability, like Fnac Darty” says the founder of Zack. LaboFnac has been running a programme that analyses after-sales service to give consumers information about the durability and reliability of certain products. A suggestion perhaps that a shift is happening.

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France has adopted a second tool to promote the repair of certain devices: funds for re-use. Established under the Agec law, their capital will be directed directly to around a thousand different social and community-led organisations such as recycling centers that will promote the reuse of used objects and allow for their return into circulation. “It has been a long job, but we have managed to direct 100% of these funds to social and community organisations that promote the circular economy”, rejoices the person responsible for the Agec law.

A global movement accelerating gently

The thorny issue of how to manage e-waste is central to number of countries who are also trying to encourage the recycling and repair of objects. After a number of years debating, on the 25th of November 2020, the European Parliament adopted a law for the right to repair. With this resolution, ministers attempted to impose measures that promote recycling and repair including the reduction in costs of materials needed for repair, the obligation to make spare parts available for a certain minimum period, open access to the documentation needed to make repairs and guarantees covering spare parts. However, this proves to be problematic as the price of spare parts fluctuates from country to country

In the UK, a collection of measures were 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). As written about by Florence Wildblood in [this article](#).

Sweden, Portugal, Belgium, Malta and other countries have decided to reduce the VAT on the repair of certain products to encourage consumers to choose

this option. But there is a very real challenge. How do you make repairing products desirable when it is more onerous than simply buying a new product that will be guaranteed for longer than a second hand product?

Europe is not alone in addressing this issue, with the US looking set to adopt similar methods imminently. Although no text has been directly announced, according to [Repair.eu](https://repair.eu), a European coalition of organisations involved in repair, Joe Biden has written a decree asking the Federal Trade Commission to write new laws concerning the restrictions on the repairability of mobile phones. Certain states including Massachusetts, Minnesota and the state of New York are also planning to adopt their own Fair Repair Acts.

With these measures, France has taken a lead on its European neighbours. According to Marta de Cidrac, “with the creation of this index, we are supporting the production of more durable products. Eco design is also a consideration when exporting goods, and France should be exporting this very model internationally.” Furthermore, with France soon to become the president of the European Union, there is a very real opportunity to realise an EU wide green agenda.

This is the second part of The Repairability Report, a four-part article series from Maddyness 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.

Part 1: [Electronic waste arrives in Africa in the form of 'donations'](#)

Part 2: [With Amazon destroying millions of unused items every year, what are we going to do about electronic waste?](#)