Histories of Technology's Persistence: Repair, Reuse and Disposal
Workshop at the Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH), University of Luxembourg
7-8 December 2018
Submission deadline: 2 July 2018

The everyday use of technology involves practices of maintenance and repair but also raises questions of reuse and removal, dismantling and disposal. According to Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift (2007: 19), repair and maintenance constitute "the engine room of modern economies and societies". The current "maintainers network" (Russell/Vinsel 2018) argues for an emphasis on maintenance instead of the traditional focus on invention and innovation in the field of history of technology. Indeed, we still know surprisingly little about the history of repair, reuse and disposal practices. In his plea for a history of "technology-in-use", David Edgerton (2008: 81) summarised: "Unfortunately we are not in a position to give an overview of the main trends in the history of maintenance and repair. Has maintenance as a proportion of output gone up or down? Where there has been a trade-off between initial cost and maintenance, what have producers and consumers gone for?" We still lack answers to these questions, which is why we are organising a workshop to bring together historians of maintenance and repair.

Furthermore, we want to combine our focus on maintenance and repair with issues of reuse, dismantling and disposal. Repair, reuse and removal are closely interlinked phenomena related to the lives and persistence of technologies, and they go beyond the question of innovation: When technical artefacts become old and outworn, decisions have to be taken as to whether it is necessary, worthwhile or possible to maintain and repair them, to reuse or dismantle them for different purposes, or to get rid of them. And these decisions depend among other factors on the availability of second-hand markets, repair infrastructures and dismantling or disposal facilities. This is why cultures of repair should be studied with regard to the life span of technical artefacts and their possible "second" or "third lives" and "afterlives" (Krebs/Schabacher/Weber 2018). Steve Jackson recently argued for "broken world thinking": Historians of technology should take "erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as (...) starting points" for their research and narratives (Jackson 2014: 221). In a similar vein, but with an emphasis on technology's persistence, we would like to stress the long lives of old technologies whose form and duration has been shaped by maintenance, repair, reuse and disposal infrastructures, by their availability or absence, and by the related economies of waste, recycling and reuse. It is generally assumed that practices of repair and reuse have gradually declined along with the rise of 20th-century mass production, mass consumption and throw-away societies. However, it is safe to argue that maintenance and repair have not become obsolete in modern consumer societies. For one, production and infrastructure facilities are in constant need of maintenance to keep them running. And even the spread of new consumer technologies such as automobiles, television sets and household appliances has greatly depended on maintenance and repair services as well as second-hand markets and refurbishment shops (Krebs/Schabacher/Weber 2018). Moreover, while cultures of repair have declined in certain areas, they have thrived in others, as can be seen by the post-war "do-it-yourself" and the current "iFixit" movements. Seen from a global perspective, repair and reuse markets have not disappeared, but have been outsourced – along with toxic waste disposal and recycling practices – to regions far away from the places of technologies' first-time usage.

In short, the aim of our international workshop is to bring together the growing scholarship in the history of repair, reuse, dismantling and disposal. Some of the questions we would like to address are:

- What can we learn from microhistories of repair, reuse and waste disposal? And from a macrohistorical perspective: How have the economies of repair, reuse and removal changed over time?
- What links can be identified between the rise and decline of maintenance and disposal systems and societal developments? For instance, how has the governance of maintenance and disposal changed (or not) between pre-industrial, industrial and post-industrial societies?
- What role has maintenance played in the development and momentum of technical infrastructures and large technological systems?
- Who are the agents and experts of maintenance, reuse and disposal, and what socio-technical positions do they hold?
- How have the supply and pricing of spare parts, the repairability of technical designs, legal questions of maintenance and warranty, as well as disposal requirements changed over time? What role have standards and regulations played in shaping maintenance and disposal regimes?
- What is the role of a historiography of maintenance, repair, reuse and waste disposal? Should historians contribute to the current repair movement and in what ways might they contribute to a more sustainable world?

Travel and accommodation costs of invited workshop participants will be covered by the C2DH.

The workshop will be based on pre-circulated papers (approx. 4,000 words; deadline 16 November 2018). Workshop contributions will be published in an edited volume (print and open access ebook).

Please send proposals (350 words) to stefan.krebs@uni.lu; deadline 2 July 2018.