

Note on the destruction of unsold electronics

Additional evidence by countries

31.10.2023

Following up on our letter dated May 26 [1], which was signed by 46 NGOs and business associations, we would like to reiterate our call to support the inclusion of electronics in the scope of an immediate ban on the destruction of unsold goods. This note compliments the letter by gathering further available evidence of the destruction of unsold electronics from across Europe, and highlights that there is sufficient evidence and a robust case to support a ban.

This comes in the context of the newly released Eurostat data on WEEE, showing that levels of electrical and electronic waste have once again reached record levels across Europe with the put on the market and collection growing by 76% and 65% respectively between 2012 to 2021 [2].

The table below includes a combination of academic and grey literature [3,4,5] as well as investigative journalism which starts to identify the extent of the destruction of unsold electronics in large quantities across Europe, sorted by country. Key findings from this include:

- There is widespread evidence of the destruction of unsold electronics from multiple Member States.
- Waste management companies working with retailers often sign non-disclosure agreements preventing them from revealing the extent of the practice (which may limit the availability of data).
- The main driver for the destruction of unsold goods appears to be cost cutting or pressure from major online retailers.

Unsold goods also represent a key opportunity for secondary markets and social economy actors: estimates show the untapped value of destroyed electronics in the EU was 3,7 billion Euro in 2022 [6]. In stark contrast, prominent in the table below are online retailers and notably Amazon, which has nearly tripled its profit this year [7]. In this way, we would stress the need to realise the economic potential of genuinely circular business models, and prevent profiteering from malpractice which unnecessarily results in the destruction of precious resources.

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- [1] Letter to the Members of the European Parliament - Environment Committee: Include textiles and electronics in the scope of an immediate ban on the destruction of unsold goods. (2023). <https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/letter-on-the-destruction-of-unsold-goods-May-2023.pdf>
- [2] Eurostat (2023) Waste Statistics - Electrical and Electronic Equipment. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/env_waseleeos/default/table?lang=en
- [3] Rödiger, L., Jespsen, D., Zimmermann, T. (2021). Policy Brief on Prohibiting the Destruction of Unsold Goods. Prepared by Ökopool for the European Environmental Bureau. <https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Prohibiting-the-destruction-of-unsold-goods-Policy-brief-2021.pdf>
- [4] Roberts, H., Milios, L., Mont, O., & Dalhammar, C. (2023). Product destruction: Exploring unsustainable production-consumption systems and appropriate policy responses. *Sustainable Production and Consumption*, 35, 300-312. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352550922003050#s0045>
- [5] Pourhejazy, P. (2020). Destruction decisions for managing excess inventory in e-commerce logistics. *Sustainability*, 12(20), 8365. <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/20/8365#B19-sustainability-12-08365>
- [6] Rödiger, L., Jespsen, D., Zimmermann, T. (2021). Policy Brief on Prohibiting the Destruction of Unsold Goods. Prepared by Ökopool for the European Environmental Bureau. <https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Prohibiting-the-destruction-of-unsold-goods-Policy-brief-2021.pdf>
- [7] Jones, C. (2023, October 26). Amazon profits nearly triple as company reports \$143.1bn in revenue. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/26/amazon-quarter-profits-revenue-increase>

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Source type	Country	Year	Description	Source
News article	Austria	2018	Amazon destroys masses of unsold products and returns, including electronics.	Amazon: Retouren werden weiterhin massenhaft zerstört. (2018, November 23). Der Standard. https://www.derstandard.de/story/2000092026322/amazon-retouren-werden-weiterhin-massenhaft-zerstoert
News article	Belgium	2023	Retail expert confirms that destroying returns of textiles and electronics products also take place in Belgium, mainly for cheap or damaged products.	Liesenborghs, G. (2023, January 23). Bij heel wat webshops kan je je pakje gratis retourneren, maar wat gebeurt er dan mee? Het Nieuwsblad. https://www.nieuwsblad.be/cnt/dmf20230123_95378946
Report	EU	2021	Report extrapolates that the sum of electronics and clothing that will have been destroyed in the EU amounted to EUR 21.74 billion in 2022. Estimates based on national data that return rates of electronics in e-commerce are between 5-15%, of which 4-10% are being destroyed. Summarises reasons for product destruction as identified in the literature.	Rödiger, L., Jespersen, D., Zimmermann, T. (2021). Policy Brief on Prohibiting the Destruction of Unsold Goods. Prepared by Ökopool for the European Environmental Bureau. https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Prohibiting-the-destruction-of-unsold-goods-Policy-brief-2021.pdf
Report	EU	2023	Report estimates that 98,000 microwaves and 140,000 kettles are destroyed respectively each year. For these two products this represents 25,000 tonnes of CO ₂ eq, 690 tonnes of steel, 110 tonnes of glass, 2 million litres of water annually.	Cambridge Econometrics (2023) New EU eco-design proposals: case studies to illustrate their potential impact. https://eeb.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Impact-of-EU-ecodesign-regs.pdf
News article	France	2019	Amazon destroyed 3.2 million of objects in 2018, according to the General Confederation of Labour (CGT). Indications that 70-80% of this products were in sellable condition. 300'000 unsold, new objects, including electronics, were destroyed in just one warehouse within 3 months. Strongly increasing storage prices (EUR 26/m ³ at first, EUR 500/m ³ after six months, EUR 1000/m ³ after a year) push external sellers to eliminate their leftover stock quickly, whereby disposal is the cheapest option.	Pacary, C. (2019, January 11). Amazon, vendeur de destruction massive. Le Monde. https://www.lemonde.fr/television-radio/article/2019/01/11/amazon-vendeur-de-destruction-massive_5407944_1655027.html Le groupe Amazon accusé d'avoir détruit plus de 3 millions d'objets neufs l'an passé en France. (2019, January 12). Franceinfo.

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				<p>https://www.francetvinfo.fr/internet/amazon/le-groupe-amazon-accuse-d-avoir-detruit-plus-de-3-millions-d-objets-neufs-l-an-passe_3141717.html</p> <p>Amazon France accused of destroying 3m unsold items. (2019, January 13). Connexion France.</p> <p>https://www.connexionfrance.com/article/French-news/Amazon-France-accused-of-destroying-3m-unsold-items-in-Capital-M6-investigation</p>
Report	France	2021	Analysis suggests that 1% of all electronic appliances in France remain unsold and destroyed each year.	<p>ADEME (2021). Etude des gisements et causes des invendus non alimentaires et de leurs voies d'écoulement. (including footwear)</p> <p>https://librairie.ademe.fr/dechetseconomie-circulaire/5035-etude-des-gisements-et-des-causes-des-invendusnon-alimentaires-et-de-leurs-voies-d-ecoulement.html</p>
News article	Germany	2018	Large scale destruction of products such as fridges, washing machines, dishwashers, phones and tablets. Products worth ten thousands euros each day in one Amazon logistics centre. Amazon also offers external vendors to destroy their products for them.	<p>Hielscher, H., Goebel, J., & Brück, M. (2018, June 8). „Das ist ein riesengroßer Skandal“: Amazon vernichtet massenhaft Neuware.</p> <p>https://www.wiwo.de/unternehmen/handel/das-ist-ein-riesengrosser-skandal-amazon-vernichtet-massenhaft-neuware/22658544.html</p> <p>Retouren für den Müll. (2018, June 12). ZDF Frontal.</p> <p>https://www.zdf.de/uri/df0bd02f-6d5f-48b5-bf0c-c69da9f844f2</p> <p>Amazon vernichtet neuwertige Waren in großem Stil. (2018, June 8). Der Spiegel.</p> <p>https://www.spiegel.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/amazon-</p>

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				<p>vernichtet-neuwertige-waren-in-grossem-stil-a-1211876.html</p> <p>DW. (2018, June 8). Amazon schreddert seine Retouren – DW – 08.06.2018. https://www.dw.com/de/amazon-schreddert-seine-retouren/a-44130688</p> <p>Fritsch, L. (2018, August 23). Amazon vernichtet in Massen neue und zurückgegebene Ware—WELT. Die Welt. https://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article177219326/Amazon-vernichtet-in-Massen-neue-und-zurueckgegebene-Ware.html</p> <p>FAZ. (2018, June 8). Amazon vernichtet massenhaft neuwertige Produkte. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/unternehmen/amazon-vernichtet-massenhaft-neuwertige-produkte-15629631.html</p>
Journal article	Germany	2020	Authors speculate that the cost of managing electronic returns, which is higher than for other products, is a reason for product destruction, but that due to the lack of reporting requirements, this is difficult to verify.	<p>Hermann, A. & Gailhofer, Peter & Gsell, Martin & Kampffmeyer, Nele & Schomerus, Thomas. (2021). Produktverantwortung im Onlinehandel. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Peter-Gailhofer/publication/348785811_Produktverantwortung_im_Onlinehandel/links/6010439b45851517ef197d25/Produktverantwortung-im-Onlinehandel.pdf</p>
Journal article	Germany	2020	In 2014, return rate for electronic products in e-commerce in Germany were 5-7%, of which around 5% were destroyed. In 2018, 750'000 electronic products were destroyed.	<p>Asdecker, Björn; Karl, David & Sucky, Eric (2017): Retourenmanagement als Erfolgsfaktor des Handels: Springer. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309640708_Retourenmanagement_als_Erfolgsfaktor_des_Handels</p>

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Press release	Germany	2021	Destruction of unsold products, including new electronics, at so-called "destroy stations". One truck load of products a week in one logistics centre.	Jettka, B. (2021, May 20). Greenpeace-Recherche zeigt: Amazon zerstört Neuware. Greenpeace Deutschland Pressemitteilungen. https://presseportal.greenpeace.de/204262-greenpeace-recherche-zeigt-amazon-zerstort-neuware
Journal article	Germany	2021	Disposal rate of electronics in online retail found to be between 0.2-1.5% .	Karl; Asdecker (2021): How does the Covid-19 pandemic affect consumer returns: an exploratory study. Universität Bamberg. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309640708_Re_tourenmanagement_als_Erfolgsfaktor_des_Handels
News article	Germany	2022	Amazon destroyed 1.840 tonnes of unsold and returned products in Germany in 1.5 years, including electronics.	Randerath, A., & Odenthal, S. (2022, October 11). Amazon: Trotz Gesetz - Neuware und Retouren im Müll. https://www.zdf.de/uri/b1bd99d1-66c7-4773-857c-7224c156ebe4 Kaleta, P. (2022, October 12). Operation 'Remove': Interne Unterlagen zeigen, wie Amazon Hunderte Tonnen teils neuwertiger Produkte wie Laptops wegwirft. Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.de/wirtschaft/operation-remove-interne-unterlagen-zeigen-wie-amazon-hunderte-tonnen-teils-neuwertiger-produkte-wie-laptops-wegwirft-a/
Journal article	Intl.	2020	Article analyses product destruction as a practice for dealing with overstock. Identifies factors that influence decision making on that topic, such as profit margin and image of the company.	Pourhejazy, P. (2020). Destruction decisions for managing excess inventory in e-commerce logistics. Sustainability, 12(20), 8365. https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/20/8365#B19-sustainability-12-08365
News article	Italy	2020	Amazon destroys up to 100'000 unsold products monthly, including electronics. Amazon's strongly increasing storage prices (EUR 36/m3 to 170/m3) push external sellers to eliminate	Guzzo, R. D., Muratori, E., & Pisano, R. (2020, January 21). Amazon, uno smaltimento al di sopra di ogni sospetto.

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			their leftover stock rapidly, for which Amazon offers destruction or return - return costs EUR 0.25 while destruction costs EUR 0.10 per item. They have strict confidentiality clauses for waste management companies and employees.	Mani Tese. https://www.manitese.it/amazon-smaltimento-sopra-ogni-sospetto Di Prospero, M. (2020, February 12). Come Amazon distrugge i prodotti invenduti delle aziende terze— UAGNA. Uagna: news, recensioni, anteprime, guide e soluzioni per videogiochi. https://www.uagna.it/curiosita/come-amazon-distrugge-i-prodotti-invenduti-delle-aziende-terze-124333
Report	Netherlands	2020	Expert group finds that around 4.1% of e-commerce returns are destroyed (mixed products, including electronics), whereby only 50% of the destroyed products are defect/damaged. Expert group is mainly in favour of a ban on product destruction.	Expertgroep Return on Return. (2020). Waarde halen uit retouren. https://www.shoppingtomorrow.nl/nl/bluepapers/return-on-returns-2020
Report	Netherlands	2021	Return rates for consumer electronics is estimated to be 3-8% in the Netherlands, of which one third is not resold but goes back to the manufacturer or disposal. Finds that many online retailers included in the study support a ban on the destruction of undamaged returns.	Van Eijk, H. (2021). Retouren in e-commerce: hoe online retailers balanceren tussen klanttevredenheid, kosten en duurzaamheid: Marktverkenning naar de retouruitdaging in e-commerce en de ontvankelijkheid voor eventuele overheidsinterventies door online retailers. Reductify for the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water. https://www.cirkelregio-utrecht.nl/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/in_e-commerce_hoe_online_retailers_balanceren_tussen_klanttevredenheid_kosten_en_duurzaamheid.pdf
Company blog	Netherlands	2022	Company that offers product destruction services states that products, including consumer electronics, are often destroyed even though there is nothing wrong with them, because it is cheaper than inspecting, repackaging and reselling. State that "certainly products from third-party sellers sold through sales platforms such as Bol.com and Amazon are destroyed upon a return."	Brouwer, P. (2022, June 14). E-commerce retourzendingen duurzaam vernietigen? Brantjes. https://www.brantjes.com/e-commerce-retouren-duurzaam-vernietigen/

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News article	Spain	2021	Amazon destroys thousands of products every day, whereby a majority are electronics - up to five trailers of products destroyed every day only in the Madrid area. Waste management not allowed to disclose arrangement due to confidentiality clauses.	<p>Plaza, A., & Heras, J. (2021, October 27). Saica, la 'trituradora' de Amazon: Destruye y recicla cada día miles de productos. El Periodico de Aragon. https://www.elperiodicodearagon.com/aragon/2021/10/27/saica-destruye-recicla-miles-productos-58846855.html</p> <p>Plaza, A. (2021, October 25). Amazon destruye cada día miles de productos sin vender. Diario Córdoba. https://www.diariocordoba.com/sociedad/2021/10/25/amazon-destruye-dia-miles-productos-58772563.html</p>
News article	Spain	2021	Amazon destroys returns with minimal damage (sometimes only damaged packaging or phones just missing a charger), including electronics. Specifically also expensive electronics. Employees report that destruction of products is a common practice, including electronics.	<p>Plaza, A. (2021, October 23). Amazon destruye cada día en España miles de productos sin vender. elperiodicodeespana. https://www.epe.es/es/activos/empresas/20211023/amazon-destruye-dia-espana-miles-12264964</p>
News article	Spain	2021	Due to overloading, many products, including electronics, are damaged by robots in Amazon warehouses. Products are then destroyed. Products from sellers that arrive at Amazon with slightly damaged packaging are rejected: offered to be sent back, sold at liquidation or destroyed. Reports that destruction is often offered for free.	<p>Plaza, A. (2021, October 23). Amazon destruye cada día en España miles de productos sin vender. elperiodicodeespana. https://www.epe.es/es/activos/empresas/20211023/amazon-destruye-dia-espana-miles-12264964</p>
News article	Spain	2021	Contract with seller contains the right for Amazon to destroy the seller's merchandise without their consent or right to compensation. In case of dispute over fraudulent activities, Amazon will destroy within 30 days by default	<p>Plaza, A. (2021, October 23). Amazon destruye cada día en España miles de productos sin vender. elperiodicodeespana. https://www.epe.es/es/activos/empresas/20211023/amazon-destruye-dia-espana-miles-12264964</p>
Journal article	Sweden/ UK	2022	Based on interviews with actors from electronics and textiles industry based in Sweden and UK, study identifies multiple causes for product destruction such as purchasing in bulk and	<p>Roberts, H., Milios, L., Mont, O., & Dalhammar, C. (2023). Product destruction: Exploring unsustainable production-consumption systems and appropriate policy responses.</p>

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			overstocking, product characteristics, profit margin considerations.	Sustainable Production and Consumption, 35, 300-312. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352550922003050#s0045
News article	UK	2021	Investigations show thousands of unsold products, including electronics (TVs, laptops, headphones) are being destroyed.	Wood, Z. (2021, June 22). Amazon faces MPs' scrutiny after destroying laptops, tablets and books. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/jun/22/amazon-faces-mps-scrutiny-after-destroying-laptops-tablets-and-books

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