10 Mine, yours and 'shared': The ethical discourse of collaborative consumption

Jeroen Oskam

Introduction

The so-called 'sharing' movement emerged during the 2008-2013 financial and economic crisis, with a discourse that proposed an alternative to the economic system that had caused it. The businesses and platforms that identified with the movement also adopted the claim that they would represent a more benign and more 'human' economic model than the centralized power that had proven to be harmful to society and to the environment. In other words, 'sharing' introduced a discourse about good and evil that pervaded the commercial performance, the regulation and the academic study of the movement. This chapter will first look at the programmatic texts of 'sharing', to subsequently analyse how its ethical principles manifested itself in the social debate.

This debate has been ongoing especially since the success of platforms such as Airbnb and Uber turned them into disruptive phenomena, that not only affected incumbent competitors – hotels and taxi companies – but society as a whole. This chapter attempts to distinguish the interpretations of good and evil for five different instances of this debate: the general discussion about 'sharing', including whether the denomination is appropriate; the campaigns before the Proposition F referendum in San Francisco, to decide whether restrictions should be imposed on vacation rentals to protect the housing market; the discussion around Airbnb in Amsterdam, that linked vacation rentals to the debate on 'overtourism'; the charitable initiatives by Airbnb and the discussion on rating systems. The analysis will show that different ethical principles collide in these debates. These differences will help understand how the social and political understanding of 'sharing' – in particular, in the regulation debate – have shifted in the second half of the decade.

The ethical discourse of sharing and collaborative consumption

Sharing as an ethical movement

The first texts that defined 'sharing' or 'collaborative consumption' can be read as ethical manifestoes. Rachel Botsman's famous TED-talk (2010) started outlining the pragmatic convenience of bartering things such as old DVDs, but then explained these activities as caused by a wake-up from a "*humongous hangover of emptiness and waste*" that had been the hyper-consumption of the twentieth century. Contemporary millennials were moving, according to Botsman, from a culture of 'me' to a culture of 'we', thus showing greater concern for sustainability and for innate community needs:

> I mean, we're monkeys, and we're born and bred to share and cooperate. And we were doing so for thousands of years, whether it's when we hunted in packs, or farmed in cooperatives, before this big system called hyper-consumption came along and we built these fences and created out own little fiefdoms. But things are changing, and one of the reasons why is the digital natives, or Gen-Y. (Botsman, 2010)

Saving resources and bonding with other humans are principles opposed to excessive consumption —described as a 'Ponzi scheme', but not to the underlying market dynamics. Rather than buying power drills individually, we should share one with our neighbours: "*So why don't you rent the drill, or, even better, rent out your own drill to other people and make some money from it?*", leaving unresolved which system of division of social responsibilities would bring consumption down to efficient community levels; or, put simply, who buys and who rents.

This is not a trivial omission, as it prepares the grounds for a next step in the reasoning of 'sharing'. Adopting a term that was originally associated with empowering the poor in Asian countries through small amounts of credit (Hasan, 2002), Parisian home-owners who put their house on Airbnb now became 'micro-entrepreneurs' (Botsman, 2012). As such, they became empowered through 'collaborative consumption', with this latter word differentiating it from more traditional emancipatory movements: "*instead of consuming to keep up with the Joneses, people are consuming to get to know the Joneses*".

Similarly, Gansky (2010) promotes 'sharing' primarily as a business opportunity, but also one that is driven by ethical concerns about climate change, community and things that matter more than property, such as "*their health, friendships, traveling, meeting new people, getting inspired, sharing good food, creating great memories, and having more time to spend with their families*"

(p. 36). As for Botsman, reputation systems cause a transparency that forces companies to be 'boldly honest'. But also Gansky applauds a commercial approach to 'sharing' that seems at odds with the ideas of reducing consumption. The 'opportunities for everyone' argument is at odds with her celebration of a 'home-sharer' that had purchased almost a hundred properties to list them on Roomorama.

Similar to Botsman, Sundararajan (2016) sees convenience and economic efficiency as the most salient advantages of 'sharing' business models, combined with the same naïve vision of an economy analogous to that of 'collaborative consumption' prior to the industrial revolution. The peer-to-peer movement thus transforms into that of 'crowd-based capitalism'. One of the positive effects of a decentralised economy that Sundararajan highlights is that, as micro-entrepreneurs, participants are empowered to pursue their passions rather than working in 9-to-5 jobs. Thus, crowd-based capitalism becomes a driver for individual freedom and personal expression. Ideologically Airbnb's founders show most affinity with this understanding of 'sharing' as crowd-based capitalism. As "*commerce with the promise of human connection*" (Gebbia, 2016), offering a place to sleep to strangers is in the first place a business venture.

Political interpretations

The programmatic texts of the 'sharing' advocates offered a novel cocktail of solidarity, opportunities for all, sustainability, rebellion against corporate power, economic efficiency and free entrepreneurship. Besides the general appeal of innovations in a world demoralised by the financial and economic crisis, everyone could feel inspired by at least a part of this 'sharing' package. This explains why even activities of questionable legality would hardly encounter any effective political response in the first half of the decade.

Different cities explored the emancipatory potential and the environmental aspirations of the 'sharing' movement (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2016; Russo & Soro, 2016). The fact that emerging platform businesses were initially framed as groundswell communities competing with incumbent corporations (Oskam, 2019a), made it seem natural for progressive politicians to support initiatives; the question was therefore rarely *how* 'sharing' should be regulated, but rather *whether* public authorities could interfere at all.

At the same time, users of the platforms were not only found to be mostly millennials, urban residents, and with higher levels of education and income; their political views were also found to be skewed to the left (Beer & Gier, 2016, Pew Research Center, 2016). This may be explained by an affinity with the 'sharing' rhetoric, but this skewedness is possibly also associated with

confounding factors; for instance, frequent ride hailing users often do not own cars, whilst 'homesharing' users may in general have a preference for the more individual and adventurous type of holiday that fits their middle-class status (Holt, 2011; Oskam, 2020b). Nevertheless, it is remarkable that in the US a majority of both liberal and conservative users agree that these services should be legal, or allowed to operate outside regulatory structures in the case of ride hailing, and untaxed (Pew Research Center, 2016).

In the second half of the decade, the growth of platform activities made their negative effects visible, and ever more publications (Slee, 2015) drew attention to the corporate interests that drove this growth. The support for Proposition F in San Francisco and the crackdown on Airbnb in Barcelona mark a shift in opinion in which the political left became critical of 'sharing' as it had evolved, and in favour of strict regulatory measures that would reduce its impact, or bring its back to its utopian roots. Curiously, Airbnb kept accusing its left-wing critics of defending the status quo and serving the interests of the hotel industry (Said, 2015; May, 2016).

The different definitions and denominations used for 'sharing' have been extensively discussed elsewhere (Gyimóthi & Dredge, 2017; Dolnicar, 2017, 2021; Oskam, 2019a). Whether this term is appropriate for the economic activities of platforms such as Uber and Airbnb is not discussed here; precisely the adoption – or rejection – of certain labels are determined by ethical points of view.

Motivations for 'sharing'

Germann Molz (2013) studies the moral discourse of Couchsurfing as one that questions the capitalist model of tourism: its users consider it to be a morally superior alternative to the commodified exchanges of mainstream tourism. Steylaerts and O'Dubhghaill (2012) define the appeal of Couchsurfing as the 'authenticity' associated with informal lodgings, opposed to the 'staged' experiences of commercial hospitality. This driver of non-monetary Couchsurfing is expanded, in later articles, to the commercial 'sharing' of Airbnb, albeit often alongside practical and financial motives. Tussyadiah (2015) underscores the human connection as a motive to stay in Airbnb accommodation. In his first article, Guttentag (2015) mentions the 'local' experience and the possibility to stay in 'non-touristy' areas, although his later research (Guttentag et al., 2017) gives a nuanced analysis of the user motivations in different segments. Also, Stors and Kagermeier see Airbnb as a way for tourists to leave the 'tourist bubble' (Stors & Kagermeier, 2017). Paulauskaite et al. (2017) consider authenticity to be a "*core feature of the sharing and experience economies*" (p. 620).