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Promises and paradoxes of the sharing economy: An organizing framework

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we take stock of the ambivalent and contested nature of the sharing economy. Considering the 'sharing economy' as an umbrella construct and an essentially contested concept, we position the sharing economy as resting on three foundational cores: (1) Access economy, (2) Platform economy, and (3) Community-based economy. We show how each core holds distinct promises and paradoxes. This organizing framework shows how combining the cores can help sharing-economy initiatives to navigate certain tensions, but can also lead to new ones. We highlight the paradoxical nature of the sharing economy and make a case for balanced initiatives that combine the promises of each core while mitigating contradictions. We conclude by introducing the nine articles of the special issue, connecting their contributions to our organizing framework.

1. Introduction

While sharing is an old social practice (Belk, 2010), it is currently being expanded and redefined into an exploding 'sharing economy' by leveraging the power of Web 2.0 technologies (Belk, 2014a). Even though the term has become popular, there is no agreement on what the sharing economy is exactly. The notion encompasses very heterogeneous practices and sectors, and covers a wide spectrum of organizational forms, ranging from for-profit to non-profit initiatives (Acquier et al., 2016; Schor, 2014; Sundararajan, 2016). In the accommodation industry, for example, initiatives such as Airbnb (online rental marketplace), Couch Surfing (free home sharing), Guest to Guest (home exchange), and Fairbnb (fair and non-extractive vacation-rental movement) have disrupted the traditional rules of the game.

While the sharing economy experiences fast growth and has a pervasive impact on society, it is presently replete with paradoxes and tensions about its boundaries, effects and logics (Richardson, 2015). Some view the sharing economy as an alternative to market capitalism, yet it might actually bolster capitalism instead (Murillo et al., in this issue; Richardson, 2015; Schor et al., 2016). And, even if the sharing economy promotes 'more sustainable consumption and production practices, [it also] reinforce[s] the current unsustainable economic paradigm' (Martin, 2016: 159).

This article – and the special issue as a whole – presents an approach to research that takes account of the internal diversity, complexity and contradictions of the sharing economy. In the following, we first discuss the nature of the sharing economy as a theoretical concept in social

science. Starting with a discussion about definitions, we conceptualize the sharing economy both as an umbrella construct and an essentially contested concept. Instead of adding a new definition to an already long list, we argue that there is a need for an organizing framework that allows mapping out and making sense of the different perspectives on the sharing economy. We position the sharing economy as resting on three foundational cores – (1) Access economy, (2) Platform economy, and (3) Community-based economy –, and show how each core holds distinct promises and paradoxes.

This organizing framework makes sense of the variety of sharing economy initiatives, by showing how they relate to the different cores. The framework shows how combining these cores help sharing economy initiatives to navigate some tensions and paradoxes, but can also generate new ones. Considering the paradoxical nature of the sharing economy, we make a case for balanced initiatives that combine the promises of each component while mitigating contradictions. Lastly, we discuss how our framework contributes to current research on the sharing economy and introduce the papers of the special issue.

2. The sharing economy: conceptual and definitional challenges

One of the rare points scholars agree on is how hard it is to define the sharing economy and to draw clear conceptual and empirical boundaries. The sharing economy has become a catch-all label with strong normative underpinnings. To add to the confusion, many neighbouring concepts have been proposed including platform capitalism, on-demand (Cockayne, 2016) or gig economy (Friedman, 2014;

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Sundararajan, 2013), collaborative consumption (Botsman and Rogers, 2010), gift economy (Cheal, 1988), peer-to-peer economy (Bauwens, 2005), and access economy (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). Before turning to definitions and the links and differences between all these concepts, we first assess the nature of the sharing economy as a theoretical concept.

2.1. The sharing economy: an umbrella construct

The sharing economy is an umbrella construct, i.e. a ‘broad concept or idea used loosely to encompass and account for a set of diverse phenomena’ (Hirsch and Levin, 1999: 200). There is considerable variation in the way scholars have conceptualized and operationalized ‘sharing’, using different theories. The sharing economy straddles disciplinary boundaries including marketing (Lamberton and Rose, 2012), consumer behaviour (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Habibi et al., 2016), sociology (Schor et al., 2016), geography (Richardson, 2015), anthropology (Belk, 2014a), management (Cohen and Kietzmann, 2014), innovation (Guttentag, 2015) and law (Cohen and Sundararajan, 2015; Kassan and Orsi, 2012; Redfearn, 2016). It is not clear, therefore, how to define the sharing economy (Arnould and Rose, 2016; Belk, 2010; Frenken and Schor, 2017), if scholars can agree on a common definition, and whether currently thriving business models live up to conceptual ideas of what sharing is (Belk, 2014a).

Umbrella constructs are commonplace in social science. Still, umbrella constructs create challenges for academic communities because they generate tensions between proponents of practical relevance (‘umbrella advocates’) and those of academic rigour (‘validity police’) (Hirsch and Levin, 1999). For umbrella advocates, umbrella constructs are attractive because of their broad scope and usefulness to connect new phenomena, to keep track of empirical innovations, to build academic communities, and to be of practical relevance for managerial audiences. However, for the validity police, umbrella constructs are unattractive because a broad scope limits academic rigour. After an initial stage of emerging excitement, driven by umbrella advocates, the validity police tends to contest umbrella constructs for a lack of rigour and impose narrow definitions in order to move towards a more unified theoretical paradigm (Hirsch and Levin, 1999).

Transposing the debate about umbrella constructs to the emerging field of the sharing economy elucidates the different definitional strategies that umbrella advocates and the validity police have followed (see Table 1 for an overview of definitions). Those promoting the sharing economy concept to different audiences tend to define the field broadly, including peer-to-peer and business-to-peer initiatives, market and non-market mechanisms, as well as centralized and flat peer-to-peer systems (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Filippova, 2015; Owyang, 2014; Sundararajan, 2016). From this perspective, ‘it would be near-impossible to dislodge the terms without the risk of fracturing a growing movement of people who largely have no problem with the term, and who are building something that – for the most part – is a social and economic good’ (Sundararajan, 2016: 12). At the other end of the spectrum, scholars increasingly complain about the confusing breadth of the field, because it includes too many elements to allow proper theorization (Frenken et al., 2015). In response, they adopt narrow definitions based on an ex-ante, normative characterization of sharing, framing it as a more restricted and workable empirical object. Frenken and Schor (2017: 4) argue, for example, that ‘the sharing economy tent has become quite capacious’. They propose defining the sharing economy in a more restricted fashion as ‘consumers granting each other temporary access to under-utilized physical assets (‘idle capacity’), possibly for money’ (Frenken and Schor, 2017: 4–5). With their definition, they exclude practices such as peer production, second-hand peer-to-peer selling, business-to-consumer rental, and services-driven transactions.

While narrow definitions may be more rigorous, they also have their disadvantages. They restrain the complexity of the sharing economy as

a field of practice, and tend to ‘exclude too many interesting problems’ (Hirsch and Levin, 1999: 209). Moreover, the criteria used for each definition may be too specific, resulting in a list of individually coherent, but overall incompatible definitions. For example, some observers argue that Uber should be excluded from the sharing economy. They either denounce Uber’s pure market orientation as non-sharing (Godelnik, 2014), or argue that Uber drivers should be considered as professional, full-time taxi drivers (Meelen and Frenken, 2015). At the same time, many critics take an opposite view: they only consider the sharing economy through peer-to-peer and profit-driven platforms, such as Uber and Airbnb (see for example Slee, 2016). Such a restrained view is problematic because it neglects other initiatives that rely on alternative logics of action and value creation (such as cooperative governance, non-profit or free access logics). Hirsch and Levin (1999) suggest that the positions of umbrella advocates and validity police should coexist in order to maintain balance in academic fields, so that neither extreme can achieve total victory over the other. However, what constitutes the right balance is open to debate. It is therefore important to find a way to organize a dialogue among the different perspectives.

2.2. The sharing economy: an essentially contested concept

To add to the conceptual complexity, the sharing economy also constitutes an illuminating example of what Gallie (1956) calls ‘essentially contested concepts’. With this notion, Gallie (1956: 169) refers to concepts, such as democracy in political science, imbued with normative values, which ‘inevitably involve endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of [their] users’. While an extensive discussion of Gallie’s seven criteria characterizing essentially contested concepts is beyond the scope of this article, highlighting a few elements will show that the sharing economy qualifies as such.

The sharing economy’s normative character is a case in point. Sharing has a positive connotation and is considered as a valued achievement. However, many scholars dispute the ‘true’ nature of sharing and the proper use of the term by sharing economy initiatives. Such debates have led to distinctions between ‘true’ and ‘pseudo’ sharing (Belk, 2014b), based on the idea that ‘true’ sharing involves non-reciprocity (Belk, 2010). Arnould and Rose (2016) criticize sharing for overemphasizing exchange and suggest re-conceptualizing sharing around a more inclusive concept of mutuality. Other scholars take positions ‘against the sharing economy’. They denounce the sharing economy’s ‘feel good’ story (Murillo et al., in this issue; Slee, 2016), and criticize what is in their eyes a mystification and a misleading discourse on sharing, trust and community, hiding a darker reality.

The sharing economy’s contested nature is also reflected in its internally complex nature. The sharing economy aggregates different types of environmental, social and economic promises, each corresponding to different framings, values and debates. The ‘environmental’ promise refers to the sharing economy as promoting a more sustainable use of resources by favouring access over ownership (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Heinrichs, 2013; Martin, 2016). However, empirical research suggests that users’ environmental motivations are often of secondary importance (Böcker and Meelen, 2017; Wilhelms et al., in this issue). Others put forth a ‘social’ promise, viewing the sharing economy as a way to promote cheaper access to services, as a tool to generate non-reciprocal exchange (such as gift-giving or bartering), or as new forms of collaboration, solidarity and social bonding among individuals (Bauwens, 2005; Belk, 2010; Benkler, 2017). In contrast to this idealistic vision, recent research suggests that sharing platforms may in fact recreate the inequalities of the capitalist markets, but in different ways (Schor et al., 2016). The ‘economic’ promise refers to the sharing economy as an opportunity to break through the limitations of centralized economic and political institutions controlled by bureaucracies and professions by harnessing the power of trust, decentralized peer-to-peer networks and markets. The sharing economy is

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