

The Sharing Economy – kommunikation.medien

From a promise for a bright future to a critical view on the present

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Introduction to core competences II



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Abstract

As rapid ICT revolution and the wide spread and adoption of digital tools by the population at large are continuously reshaping whole areas of human activity, technological developments play an increasing role in producing and steering socio-economic change. One of the areas undergoing serious disruption is economics, with consumer-producer dynamics as its core component. The digital –networked– environment is restructuring interactions and relations between individuals, social as well as economic, and creating new ways of managing and exchanging resources. This enables new models of production and consumption, based on individual engagement, loose collaborations, reutilization and redistribution of goods, etc. This paper we address the “sharing economy” as one of the most debated concepts emerged with the increasing embeddedness of digital technologies in everyday life. We offer a systematic overview of the existing literature on the topic: starting from early works with a historical perspective on the origins, mechanisms and potential of this mode of social production, to later theories, which assess its developments, impacts and manifestations in daily life, and concluding with more recent works, which adopt a rather critical perspective. In these, the shortcomings and failures of sharing economy are presented and discussed, along with possible solutions and suggestions for future courses of development. We conclude with a set of policy recommendations on how to manage and regulate this new sector, balancing between encouraging innovation and ensuring a safe and secure environment for the users.

Keywords

sharing economy, digital disruption, peer production, produsage, platforms, innovation

1. Introduction

Technological developments play a central role in driving socio-economic change, and with the rapid progress of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and wide spread of digital tools in the past years, they are sweepingly encompassing and reshaping whole areas of human activities. The capitalist economy is one of the systems that has been subject to major restructuration and disruption on account of the spread of the Internet and digitalization. New trends are gaining importance in the global and local markets: traditional economy based on private property and ownership rights is giving way to new models of production and consumption, based on shared resources, more participation and engagement in social production and network-enabled collaboration.

What we call the ‘Sharing Economy’ was defined by Hamari et al. (2015, 1) as ‘the peer-to-peer-based activity of obtaining, giving, or sharing the access to goods and services, coordinated through community-based online services’. As stated by Sundararajan (2016), the concept has gained popularity largely due to the public relations activities of its major representative companies, as well as its association to a common purpose, a more connected, community-based model of capitalism. Among its key features we count: the facilitation of new services and goods exchange through the creation of new markets; efficiency maximization through capacity sharing; more network and crowd-based structures rather than centralized, hierarchical institutions (Sundararajan, 2016).

2. Origins and evolution: Peer production, Commons, Produsage

Looking at the external factors and preconditions that created a favorable context for this new market form, we are firstly talking about the origins of social production or peer production. Bauwens (2009) traces the main features of peer-to-peer production: network-based, distributed participation, equality of partners, common values, non-monetary compensation and emphasis on social governance, rather than market or managerial commands. He argues that this ‘third mode of production’ will eventually dominate the market, overriding the capitalist system. Others, however, point out that in reality, the need to engage in formal

labor to gain means of existence constrains most people from participating in non-market activities, and European societies would need to develop a ‘far more cohesive and fair social environment’ (Orsi, 2009, 32). Benkler (2006) looks at the way communication technologies affordances restructured the distribution of resources and enhanced freedom of action. With the introduction of the network and personal computers, individuals have gained much more autonomy and opportunities to participate in production, as the computing capabilities as well as information resources became widely distributed among users. These users are now able to create content and value by themselves or in loose cooperation with others and share it on the web for commercial as well as non-commercial purposes. At the same time, point-to-point connectivity and flat structures characteristic for the network have allowed buyers to communicate directly with sellers, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and intermediaries and, thus, boosting productivity. (Curran, Fenton and Freedman, 2016). This way, individuals become much more independent from both traditional producers and media owners, changing their roles from passive consumers to engaged ‘producers’. The term has been extensively explored by Bruns (2008), as a form of collective production originated in open-source projects, where multiple developers contribute to a common piece of work. In most peer-to-peer communities, contributions are voluntary and non-monetary, but the contributors obtain other types of benefits. The motivations for this participation are typically of non-financial nature, as the value comes in the form of personal gratification and community-level prestige boosts (Tappscott and Williams, 2006), as well as the identification and belonging to a community that provides purpose (Arvidsson, 2008). The key features of open-source (nobody owns it, everybody uses it, and anybody can improve it) have been successfully enforced by R. Stallman. By introducing a new form of copyright, he licensed his code for free to everyone who wanted to use it, as long as they also made their work and contributions publicly accessible. This represented the basis of the General Public License (GPL) for free software (Benkler, 2006). The principle has extended from software development to other areas of activity, mainly information and knowledge creation and distribution, evidence being projects such as Wikipedia, considered iconic for ‘a new era of collaboration and participation’ (Tappscott and Williams, 2006, 18). As Jenkins (2006) describes it, within convergence culture ‘everyone is a participant’, as users themselves actively shape the media environment. The function of production of goods and services is transferred into the digital environment, from traditional corporations to transnational networks (Castells, 2010). Through the shift enabled by symmetrical media technologies, creative individuals got the ability to connect and work for a common purpose of promoting their cultural production alongside the traditional media entities. This change was defined as the transformation from an audience of consumers to content creators (Bruns, 2010).

Stemming from the open-source projects, social, collaborative production gradually spread into other areas of the market, following the shift towards an economy built around immaterial production. With the growing role of information, both as a central resource in value creation and a source of economic and social power, non-market production has gained importance alongside traditional industrial models, as a more efficient logic in the creation of immaterial wealth. Arvidsson (2008) argued that the emerging system of social production is consolidated by the failure of the capitalist economy in responding to basic human needs and the subsequent loss of its legitimacy. He proposes that self-organized forms of production have an important potential for shaping a post-capitalist economic system, based on a new law of value. This new value logic, in contrast with the labor theory of value, arises from the realization of the shortcomings of monetary incentives as well as the failure to reflect the productive power of organizations in the price system.

In contrast to the Industrial Information Economy, the digitalized Network Information Economy presents two shifts: to an economy centered on information and the dramatic decrease of processing and connectivity costs. Commons represent a form of shared property structure, where resources are not privately owned or controlled, but rather free and available to practically everyone. This specific type of resources, coupled with the network's connectivity features enables new modes of organizing production: non-market, non-proprietary and highly decentralized (Benkler, 2006). In the initial phase of its evolution, the Internet and the opportunities it presented were estimated to have a huge potential for the liberalization of markets and the democratization of societies in general, by addressing modern economic imbalances, facilitating access, connectivity and participation, as well as encouraging market growth (Sundararajan, 2016). The new production models were gaining importance on the market, as alternative strategies of work organization and new ways of value and wealth creation, featuring conditions such as access to computing, transparency, globalization and democratization of knowledge (Curran, Fenton and Freedman, 2016). Another claim was that due to a radical decrease of transaction and distribution costs, digitalization may provide affordable solutions for new businesses and that free distribution of information is more democratic, giving an advantage for small businesses (Tapscott and Williams, 2006).

3. 'Sharing' culture of the present

Referring to the present forms that evolved building on the peer-to-peer models we mainly address the new business models that illustrate sharing economy today. These models emerged from a shift in attitude towards consumption in the past years, and reflect an initia-

tive aimed to ‘make use of market intelligence to foster a more collaborative and sustainable society’ (Heinrichs, 2013, 229). As Heinrichs claims, relying on the principle that sharing information about goods increases their value, these systems employ ICT to enable organizations, institutions and individuals to engage in distributing excess capacity, by providing access to assets rather than ownership (PwC report, 2014).

The principle of reutilizing and pooling excess capacity has been strongly popularized by the rising concerns for the implications of consumerism on both the environment and socio-economic development. The spread of peer-to-peer exchanges into the material goods market and the dramatic drop of information and coordination costs created a favorable context for the emergence and expansion of sharing-based enterprises. With their integration into the business sector these systems encompass varied economic areas, including accommodation, retail, transportation, logistics, labor market, etc. (Codagnone, Martens, 2016). Schor argues for the classification of sharing activities into four categories: recirculation of goods (Craigslist, eBay), increased utilization of durable assets (Zipcar, Uber, Airbnb, Couchsurfing), exchange of services (TaskRabbit), and sharing of productive assets (Schor, 2014, 2).

Most authors link the beginnings of sharing economy with the emergence of its first incumbents: eBay and Craigslist, aimed to facilitate reutilization of goods (Sundararajan, 2016; Schor, 2014). Today, a multitude of platforms position themselves as representatives of the new economy, due to its promising association with innovative technologies, the positive social-interpretation of ‘sharing’, as well as the impressive success stories of companies like Airbnb and Uber, who are the image of modern platform economy (Schor, 2014). These marketplaces operate by bringing together distributed networks of individuals to collaboratively utilize under-used assets through fee-based sharing (Zervas, Proserpio, Byers, 2014; Koopman, Mitchell, Thierer, 2015). And while sharing of goods has been a well-known phenomenon in the past, the Internet has radically changed its coverage, by bringing owners and consumers closer together. Their value, argued by Koopman et. al. (2015) is reflected in more productive use of capital, more competitive demand and supply markets, lowering of transaction costs and aggregation of reviews.

Looking at the facts, PwC reports a revenue of \$14 billion generated within the key sharing sectors (automotive, hospitality, finance, staffing, and media streaming), and estimates the this figure’s growth to \$335 billion by 2025 (PwC, 2014). Exploring the demand side, a PEW survey showed that 72% of users in the US have employed on-demand online services, including eBay, Amazon Prime, Uber and Airbnb (Yaraghi, Ravi, 2017).

4. Dysfunctionalities of the platform economy

However, with the exponential growth of such exemplary marketplaces, we witnessed a similarly rising number of reports signaling dysfunctional practices as well as general implications of these structural shifts in economic activity. Corporations have been accused of attempting to bypass consumer and provider protection laws, threatening traditional employment and lowering income (Poole, 2016; Jericho, 2015), displacing existing services and failing to address economic disparities they promise to resolve (Killick, 2015; B. Lee, 2017) and even presenting totalitarian tendencies (Mathews, 2014). There have been reported cases of severe security violations that resulted in property destruction and even threats to consumers' lives (Arrington, 2011; Lieber, 2015 in Yaraghi, Ravi, 2017). Concerns have been arising for the impacts and future of the new economy, questioning its claimed fairness and transformative potential, its ability to harness and distribute public wealth, increases in inequality and monopolization of the market (Schor, 2014).

Critical discourses in the past have outlined failures of digital technologies to realize their promise of revolutionizing social and economic processes by decentralization, wealth distribution and participatory culture (Schiller, 2006) and cautioned about increased social inequalities, power asymmetries (Mansell, 2012), privatization, monopolization of markets and increase of social control (McChesney, 2013). Kreiss, Finn and Turner (2011), oppose the claims of scholars who addressed peer-production as a driver of democratization with arguments derived from Weber's analysis of bureaucracy. Emphasizing the social benefits of bureaucracy, the authors combat Benkler and Jenkins' description of social production as an egalitarian, decentralized and self-satisfying mode of participation. They question the benefits of blurring the line between private and professional life, considering it a 'coercive expansion of the workplace into everyday life' that might undermine personal autonomy and privacy (Kreiss, Finn, Turner, 2011). They also argue that in terms of accountability, bureaucratic forms provide mechanisms that ensure equality and inclusiveness, which have become questionable in the networked environment. Fish (2017) talks about corporately advanced 'technological solutionism' discourses, based on the assumption that the Internet can solve social problems. He argues that in order for technology to be empowering it needs to be regulated by 'legitimate democratic authorities'.

One central problem that digital technology aimed to solve is the concentration of (economic, political, social) power and limited access for the masses. However, Bolano (2015) argues that asymmetries are ingrained in the structure of the Internet, further empowering actors who possess greater capital, allowing corporate producers to direct the market development.

Referring to Tim Wu, Fish states that every new communication system that emerged provided a favorable environment for individuals to participate and produce content, bringing up discourses about democratization and empowerment, but shortly ended up being appropriated or ‘colonized’ by commercial companies. This view was also reflected in Schiller’s (2006) critique of modern capitalism, where big businesses exploit social labor and corporate control over networks stifles oppositional initiatives of applying information technology for decentralization. With the growing power of single platforms such as Airbnb or Uber, we see effects opposite of decentralization, described as a core-feature of the networked economy, and rather a concentration of power.

Another problematic aspect emerged from the activity of sharing platforms are the consumer-protection regulations, which were created for traditional industrial models, and prove to be incompatible with the emerging systems and unable to cope with digitally-conducted businesses (Koopman et. al., 2015). Cohen and Sundararajan (2015) define regulation as the instruments applied to the social and political fields to enforce policy objectives. They highlight some features of peer-to-peer exchange that create challenges for traditional policy frameworks, like the convergence between personal and professional services and anonymization of transaction participants.

The lack of regulations in the new, digital economy has been addressed by Lessig (2004) in the context of the Internet’s impact on property-rights. He argued that outdated legal frameworks fail to deal with the content dissemination dynamics on the web, and producers of content have lost leverage and power with the ‘sharing’ affordances of the network. Citing lawyer J. Orsi, Juliet Schor claims that digital platforms and their venture capitalist supporters are ‘siphoning off too much value’ (Schor, 2014, 1), which aligns with Lessig’s argument about the decline of revenue for producers, due to appropriation by powerful intermediaries.

Looking at the actual impacts of sharing economy, a European Commission report from 2016 states inconclusive findings and scarcity of empirical evidence, as most studies are conducted by stakeholders. Companies (Airbnb, Uber) employ scholars to provide analytics for the public discussion, but the results cannot be regarded as objective, as the methods and data used by these researchers lack transparency (Codagnone, Martens, 2016). Another report for the European Parliament provides insights on the potential of sharing economy in the EU, and predicts lower prices and higher quality of services among the positive effects, while defining wealth inequality, reduction of income and lack of traditional employment benefits as well as the emergence of new forms of social exclusion as the main threats for the future of European economy and society (Goudin, 2016). The report outlines the main legal obstacles that prevent sharing economy from reaching its full potential, mentioning that regulations

that treat structurally and operationally different platforms in the same manner hinder their activities and progress. Lack of legal frameworks diminishes participation and therefore the value of the businesses, increasing market segmentation and discouraging new initiatives.

5. Policy Implications and Recommendations

The main dilemma of regulators today is how to balance an open environment that encourages innovation and the responsibility of protecting the users' rights and interests (Ranchordas, 2015; Goudin, 2016).

Goudin (2016) proposes that in order to harness the full benefits of Sharing Economy (SE), a clear categorization of platforms is necessary for implementing specific regulation on specific services and operational models. He also suggests proper enforcement of legal obligations in order to ensure compliance to standards among providers, and promoting trust and awareness among consumers to encourage participation. Educating users about safe use and risks (Yaraghi & Ravi, 2017) as well as best practices can promote security, as well as improve the quality of services, creating value for stakeholders (Malhotra & Alstyne, 2014).

Addressing governments, specialists recommend deriving policies from empirical evidence and realistic assessments of specific contexts. Koopman et. al. (2014) argue that ex post solutions help solve problematic situation as they arise, without stifling competition and innovation. They advocate for alternative approaches to promoting equal opportunities by 'deregulating down' and relaxing old restrictions for both traditional incumbents and new businesses. For example, house renting individuals pay income and tourist taxes but not on an industrial level, like traditional hotel chains (Malhotra, Alstyne, 2014).

One popular recommendation for avoiding excessive and outdated traditional regulation to be applied to the digital environment is the implementation of self-regulation (Yaraghi, Ravi, 2017). This refers to the actors of particular industries subscribing to a set of commonly agreed practices and norms, in order to protect basic freedoms, rights and democratic principles. Some argue that contemporary platform-based economy operates in a context where the general public (users) might not benefit top-down regulations, as concentrated providers (companies) are likely to dominate in negotiating with regulators (Koopman et. al., 2015). They advocate for bottom-up policy changes, in order to represent consumer interests and address major public concerns.

Self-regulation can be defined as the practice when regulatory responsibility is not held by the government, but rather by other stakeholders. Considering that as mediators that benefit

from extensive participation of users, these platforms have an interest in promoting trust and safety, for example, by providing ID verification procedures, conducting background screenings of participants or including links to personal identification information, such as Facebook or LinkedIn profiles. The platforms themselves have a greater incentive and possibility of spotting irregularities and improper behavior, therefore internal regulation, such as implementing reputation systems and authenticating the validity of reviews should be a central responsibility (Malhotra, Alstyne, 2014). This strategy of ensuring quality of services relies on peer-to-peer signaling mechanisms, crowdsourced consumer feedback (Yaraghi, Ravi, 2017) and quality reports (post-transaction reviews), which increase transparency and create a more competitive environment (Zervas, et.al., 2014).

Some examples of self-regulatory practices are the implementation of tourist taxes on Airbnb on behalf on the government, using cashless transactions to ensure security of payments or providing commercial insurance (Goudin, 2016). Another collective source of rules and prescriptions are self-regulatory organizations. These entities emerge naturally as instruments for synthesizing regimes to govern the behavior of their members, and rely on collaborative efforts to generate, monitor and enforce normative standards (Cohen and Sundararajan, 2015).

Others recommend the platforms themselves to be proactive in shaping the legal frameworks in their sectors: being open about their operational models and explaining them to regulators to ensure proper understanding, being responsive to legitimate concerns of policy makers, applying best practices in influencing public policy by forming industry associations, as well as identifying and proposing existing regulations from other sectors or regions. Another concern is transparency and the proposed solution is sharing more data with the governments, as they might help support the organization's claims about good practice, as well as support governmental decisions by providing valuable insights into the industry (Yaraghi, Ravi, 2017; Cannon, Summers, 2014). A mix of solutions directed at different stakeholders who participate in sharing economy should be developed and implemented to build an open and collaborative environment, that would encourage innovation, address inequalities and asymmetries in the current state of the market as well as balance the potential benefits of the peer-to-peer models with legitimate concerns of safety, security and consumer protection. Democratizing the governance and ownership of platforms will help promote cooperative consumption as a social movement and reach a higher potential enabled by digital technology (Schor, 2016).

6. Conclusion

Advancements in communication technology have been constantly emerging with new tools and models that allow ever increasing connectivity and engagement. These developments have strong impacts on society, reshaping its structure and processes in all sectors, creating a new environment for social and economic exchanges. As the Internet enabled a network structure connecting individuals and allowing them to participate in collaborative projects, coordinate tasks and exchange resources, the sharing economy emerged as a response to rising concerns about sustainability and the environment, as well as an emphasis on cooperation and a more democratic society. Facilitated by digitalization, this shift has put forward new market models which were quickly adopted by new-comers in various industries, to provide novel ways of economic transactions, mediated by platform-based enterprises. With the rapid expansion of these models, critical perspectives have become more popular, cautioning about their impacts and threats on industries and social welfare in general. Opponents argue that sharing economy, like other digitally enabled practices before it, is failing to realize its promise for sustainability and democratization. Advocates of SE, however, claim that a rightly shaped regulatory framework, aimed at mitigating the externalities of the model and promoting innovation will help realize its potential. They recommend working on better policies to address the specifics of digital affordances, aligned with democratic principles and societal goals, in order to promote openness, opportunities, equality and social security.

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Biography of the author



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