

Some of the social logics of sharing

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Abstract

This paper is about sharing—the word, the act, its rhetoric, its ideologies and its logics. More specifically, it is about sharing in three different but interrelated contexts: Web 2.0, “sharing economies,” and intimate interpersonal relationships. The starting point of this paper is Web 2.0 in general, and especially social network sites (SNSs). In particular, the following is the outcome of an observation not yet systematically documented by the research literature, namely, that the constitutive activity of Web 2.0 is sharing (but see Stalder & Sützl, 2011; Wittel, 2011). This observation gives rise to the following questions: What does sharing mean in the context of Web 2.0 and SNSs? Are there other instances where sharing is a key central concept? And if so, how might they be related?

The following, which is based on an emic approach to sharing, is exploratory in nature, yet it rests on a clear argument, specifically, that in order to gain a deeper understanding of sharing in Web 2.0 we need to include other instances of cultural practices that are called sharing as well. Accordingly, in addition to SNSs, this paper discusses economies of sharing and the centrality of sharing our emotions in the management of our intimate relationships. The outcome of such an analysis is, I believe, greater than the sum of its constituent parts. This paper, therefore, represents the first attempt at outlining the interrelations between these spheres of sharing.

1. Meanings of sharing

The Oxford English Dictionary teaches us that in the sixteenth century, the verb “to share” meant “to cut into parts” or “to divide.” A ploughshare, therefore, which is the cutting edge of the plough, is so called because it shares, or splits, the earth. Likewise, when a child shares their chocolate bar they divide it: they break it up into shares. In this sense, the act of sharing is one of *distribution* and it is an active practice. Importantly, it is also a zero-sum game—when I give you some of my candy, I am left with less. Sharing as distribution is, of course, governed by cultural norms. These norms, for instance, are the subject of Katriel’s rich description of ritualized sharing and exchange among children (Katriel, 1987, 1988), as well as constituting one of the main focuses of the early anthropology of hunter-gatherer societies. From these studies it is clear that sharing is constitutive of social relations.

Another meaning of sharing is to have something in common with someone, where this thing may be concrete or abstract. For instance, when students share a dorm room, the room is both of theirs, and the dorm room itself remains whole, despite being shared. This logic also applies to abstract shared objects which cannot be owned, such as interests, fate, beliefs, or culture. Here too sharing is about distribution, but in an abstract and passive way, and in a way that is *not* a zero-sum game.

In addition to being an act of distribution, sharing can also be an act of *communication*.¹ This is the case when we talk about sharing our feelings or emotions. Unlike the two previous meanings of sharing, this sense of sharing would appear to be somewhat newer. Indeed, the first citation for the meaning of sharing as “to impart to others one’s spiritual experiences” only dates back to 1932 and is offered in the context of the Oxford Group, a Christian movement popular in the 1920s and 1930s.

From here it is a short step to the notion of sharing one’s feelings that is central to the formation and maintenance of intimate relations in contemporary western society. While sociologist of emotions Eva Illouz does not herself define sharing, this sense of the word is unmistakable in her definition of the therapeutic ideal as “the injunction to share all needs and feelings” (Illouz, 2008, p. 227). Similarly, in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s book on intimate life, they describe a “far-reaching transition. What used to be a team sharing the work [i.e., pre-modern agricultural families] has turned into a couple sharing emotions” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 48). Additionally, as Wuthnow explains when discussing a woman who was forced out of a support group for talking too much, the sharing of emotions, like the sharing of treats, also entails “explicit norms about reciprocity” (Wuthnow, 1994, p. 156). Similarly to the act of sharing a candy bar, the sharing of emotions also creates and regulates social ties.

This, then, is about as far as the dictionary takes us. In fact, I have already gone further than the dictionary. For instance, the above definitions do not tell us about the technological or social conditions of sharing; they do not tell us about the social constraints on sharing, or social sanctions for not sharing; nor do they tell us about the interrelations between different meanings of sharing today. These, though, are the types of questions we should be asking if we wish to understand the social logics of sharing.

2. Sharing in Web 2.0

Sharing is the fundamental and constitutive activity of Web 2.0 in general, and social network sites in particular. By Web 2.0 I mean Internet services based on user-generated content, most famously Facebook, but also YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, wikis, blogs and a host of others, all of which encourage us to share in various ways: countless websites have some kind of “Share” button that enables the surfer to bring the page to the attention of others—by email, via a status update on Facebook or Twitter, and so on; the Web’s largest dedicated photo-sharing site, Flickr, urges the visitor to “Share your photos;” on Facebook, where we are encouraged to “connect and share with the people in your life,” the act of posting a status update (or link, photo or video) is also called “sharing;” and so on and

¹ Wittel (2011) distinguishes between distribution and social exchange.

so on. In brief, “sharing” is the word that describes our participation in Web 2.0, but the meaning of “sharing” in this context is new.

One way of showing that there is a new meaning of the word “share” is to look at how it is used in a new context. To this end I analyzed the front pages of 44 social network sites at monthly intervals from their establishment through to the present day. Three main findings emerged. First, the objects of sharing in SNSs become fuzzier. If at first the sites asked us to share photos, or Web journals, or thoughts, with time the objects of sharing began to include such vague things as “your life,” “your world,” and “your true self.” This usage of sharing did not appear before 2007. Second, the word “share” began to appear without an object at all. That is, SNSs started running taglines such as “Join! Connect! Share!” The use of the word “share” without an object implies that by now (the first instance of sharing without an object was found in 2005) users know what “Share!” means in the Web 2.0 context. Third, activities that used not to be described as sharing became to be thus portrayed. For instance, in 2002, the front page of the photo-sharing site Fotolog contained the text, “Make it easy for friends/family to see what’s up with you. Put your latest, greatest digital photos on the Web in a log format.” In 2007, though, it introduced the tagline, “Share your world with the world.”

This new type of sharing has a different political economy from what we normally think of as sharing. A naïve perspective on sharing is that when we share something, we are left with less of whatever it was that we shared. With this type of Web 2.0 sharing, however, the political economy is different. If one surfer shares a link with another, this obviously does not mean that there is less of the website to go around. Indeed, putting aside the place of sharing in creating and sustaining social ties, sharing in Web 2.0 as described above is actually productive in quite a literal sense: the act of sharing leaves a physical trace on a server owned by a commercial enterprise. If normally sharing leaves us with less, here sharing produces the data that constitute the hard currency of Web 2.0 businesses. The value of the data produced by Web 2.0 sharing does not accrue to me, but rather to the platform through which I am sharing.

So there is a new meaning of the word sharing, and a new political economy to go with it. While the political economy has been studied, the notion of sharing itself, including a critique of its use in order to mystify commercial relations, has not (but see Fuster Morell, 2011 on “wikiwashing”).

3. Sharing economies

Sharing economies are those in which money, or more specifically, the ability to make it, is not a relevant factor in motivating participation (see especially Benkler, 2004, 2006). Sharing economies can be usefully divided into two types: sharing economies of production, and sharing economies of consumption. The paradigmatic example of a sharing

economy of production is provided by Wikipedia. Another oft-cited example is that of Linux—an entire, free operating system created outside the capitalist market economy. These are examples of economies of production that have been extensively described by Yochai Benkler, particularly in his 2006 book, *The Wealth of Networks*. There, he discusses what he claims is a new economic model that he calls commons-based peer production, or nonmarket production. Of course, to a very large degree these sharing economies of production are enabled by the network technologies of the Internet (see Lessig, 2008). This is also an argument made by Benkler, who says: “Technology does not determine the level of sharing. It does, however, set threshold constraints on the effective domain of sharing as a modality of economic production” (Benkler, 2006, p. 121). Benkler argues that current technological conditions make sharing an effective mode of production, because of the low levels of capital required to participate—all you need is a computer and an Internet connection.

While sharing is obviously a central concept here, it is not itself systematically analyzed. More than that, while Benkler’s argument is perfectly comprehensible, his own usage of the word sharing oscillates between at least two meanings: by talking about commons-based production, he is referring to goods that are shared by all. However, he calls these economies “sharing” economies—this implies an agent who is sharing something that they have with other people, be it their time, perhaps, or their knowledge. These are quite distinct meanings of sharing: Linux, for instance, is a commodity that is shared—that is, it is available in the commons—and Linux pays no one to write code. However, many software houses do pay their programmers to work on Linux. The output is shared, but it is hard to say that those workers, who are being paid a salary for their labor, are sharing.

As well as economies of production, there are also sharing economies of consumption, which are subsumed by the term Collaborative Consumption, a movement that would appear to be on the rapid ascendant in the US. According to Collaborative Consumption gurus, Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers, “Collaborative Consumption occurs when people participate in organized sharing, bartering, trading, renting, swapping, and collectives to get the same pleasures of ownership with reduced personal cost and burden, and lower environmental impact” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010). Here, the sense of sharing is much closer to the naïve understanding of it in that it is about sharing stuff that we own, but it is also about enjoying shared access to a commonly owned good.

Here too, there are two types of sharing at play, both of which are intimately related to the rise of the Internet. The first type is sharing goods that I own with other people. An example of a website that promotes this is ecoSharing.net. “How many of your books are you going to read again?”, asks the site. In this instance the Internet enables us to publish a list of objects that we are happy to lend out and, similarly, to find objects that we would like to borrow. The second type of sharing in collaborative consumption is represented by the

model of ZipCar: a third party owns a fleet of cars, and I can use one whenever I want. So again, no one is sharing, but a product is being shared.

Collaborative Consumption is currently a trending issue: for instance, it was recently included in a *Time* magazine list of “10 Ideas that will Change the World” (Walsh, 2011). But what might a critique of Collaborative Consumption look like? First, the two or three main reports that inform much of the Collaborative Consumption literature and websites were written by management and marketing consultants. In this context, sharing is an “industry with seemingly unbounded potential” (Gaskins, 2010, p. front cover). Here, then, the criticism is that the human benefit is only valuable to the extent that it can be subsumed under a business case. Second, and relatedly, the people promoting Collaborative Consumption are at great pains to disassociate sharing from anything that smells of socialism. The motivations for sharing in this regard are rooted in self-serving liberal individualism. This is very much the case in the book, *Wikinomics* (Tapscott & Williams, 2006), where commercial companies are urged to adopt practices of sharing. Furthermore, Collaborative Consumption is no less about consumption than it is about collaboration. While Botsman and Rogers (2010) decry today’s hyper-consumerism and hyper-individualism, and indeed understand Collaborative Consumption to be a response to that, they are keen to emphasize that Collaborative Consumption implies no reduction in one’s standard of living. Access to goods may trump ownership of them, but this is because it still offers “the same pleasures of ownership”² and “puts a system in place where people can share resources without [...] sacrificing their lifestyle” (p. xxi).

Of particular interest in relation to Collaborative Consumption are the connections made by its proponents with the Internet. Specifically, the Collaborative Consumption visionaries predict that the movement will take off because a generation is growing up that is used to sharing on the Internet, for whom sharing is second nature:

“Collaborative Consumption is rooted in the technologies and behaviours of online social networks. These digital interactions have helped us experience the concept that cooperation does not need to come at the expense of our individualism, opening us up to innate behaviours that make it fun and second nature to share. Indeed, we believe that people will look back and recognize that Collaborative Consumption started *online* – by posting comments and sharing files, code, photos, videos and knowledge.” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010, p. xx)

They also argue that:

² From the publisher’s Book Description, <http://www.harpercollins.com/books/Whats-Mine-Is-Yours-Intl/?isbn=9780061963544>, accessed 23.8.2011.

In the same way that individuals reflect on and report their daily activities and thoughts on Twitter or Facebook—and, in turn, have those contributions reflected on, mimicked, edited and disseminated—society is undergoing a constant process of reflexivity and adaptation. We are able to put a name to things and get a sense that we are part of a greater movement (Botsman & Rogers, 2010, pp. 212–213).

What, though, are the reasons given by the proponents of Collaborative Consumption as to *why* we should share? The explicit reasons are primarily to do with saving money during a period of economic difficulty, and preserving the environment. However, of greater interest are the implicit reasons for sharing, which can be found in references to the *timelessness* of sharing, and the fact that sharing is an activity particularly characteristic of *children*.

The timelessness of sharing is implied when Collaborative Consumption is described as being “based on natural behavioural instincts around sharing and exchanging” (Botsman & Rogers, 2010, p. 213), and references to our Stone Age ancestors. In this sense, sharing is something that mankind has always done instinctually. It is an integral part of what it means to be human. Similarly, in the Latitude report on sharing cited above, there is a heading which reads, “The new timeless culture of sharing,” which is accompanied by a photograph of a black man sifting red beans, drawing on colonialist notions of black African culture as being ahistorical. Sharing, then, is presented as the natural state of human societies.

Sharing is also presented as the natural state of human individuals, as expressed through the use of children in the imagery of a number of sharing websites. Also, Collaborative Consumers refer to studies that show how children are “naturally” cooperative, but have their instinct for sharing socialized out of them as they grow up. For instance, the authors of *What’s Mine is Yours* cite research that shows children to be “sociable and cooperative by nature. But by the age of three, children start to adhere to ‘social norms’ shaped by culture” (p. 69).

In sum, sharing is portrayed as an instinctive and natural part of our past, both as individuals and as a society. By way of critique we might note that early colonialist anthropologists viewed the “natives” as akin to children. Here, pre-historical societies are not described as childlike, but it is significant that both hunter-gatherer societies and children are seen as naturally predisposed to sharing before having that tendency corrupted by the negative influence of Western culture. Additionally, the Collaborative Consumption movement would appear to be making selective use of “science” to advance its claims. The sociology of childhood, for instance, describes a number of cultural models of childhood (such as “the evil child” or “the immanent child”), but, using experimental findings to back up their view, the advocates of Collaborative Consumption deploy only one, namely, that of “the

innocent child,” who is said to exist in a state of “pristine innocence” until spoiled “by the violence and ugliness that surrounds [him]” (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998, p. 14).

Having discussed sharing in Web 2.0 and some of the aspects of sharing economies of production and consumption, we turn now to a third sphere of sharing, that of the therapeutic narrative.

4. The therapeutic narrative

The therapeutic narrative (or discourse, or culture) sometimes refers to the psychologization of problems, or the spread of psychological diagnoses into everyday life. Here, though, the term is used to refer to the spread of the principles of psychology into personal relationships, and the way we understand our selves: for instance, that the structure of our personality is a function of significant events in our childhood and early family life (Illouz, 2007, see esp. Chapter 1; 2008, see esp. Chapter 3). In the present context, though, what is most important is that the therapeutic narrative incorporates the idea that the way to solve interpersonal problems is to talk about them and that, relatedly, the modern intimate relationship is formed and sustained through communication (Cameron, 2000). If the constitutive activity of Web 2.0 is the sharing of links, information, or updates, we might say that the sharing of emotions is the constitutive activity of the contemporary intimate relationship.

In her book, *Saving the Modern Soul*, Illouz, albeit unintentionally, makes clear the centrality of the act of sharing to therapeutic culture (Illouz, 2008). For instance, she describes the therapeutic ideal as implying “the injunction to share all needs and feelings” (p. 227). Many of the various interviews and self-help books she quotes as she makes her arguments refer to the sharing of emotions. For instance, a marriage counselor is quoted as saying:

“In over 25 years as a psychiatrist working with couples and young families, I have found that an imbalance of this kind in one or both partners can lead to two kinds of trouble in a marriage: either there is too much sharing and empathy between the partners (yes, there is actually a thing as too much!) or there is too little sharing and not enough empathy” (p. 139).

Sex and intimacy thus involve sharing feelings, but not in a haphazard way: we have to share our feelings to the correct degree, or else our relationship will be considered pathological.

Similarly, in *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim write: “As research in social history shows, with the transition to a modern society came a far-reaching transformation. What used to be a team sharing the work [i.e. pre-modern agricultural families] has turned into a couple sharing emotions” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; see also Giddens, 1991 on the pure relationship).

The centrality of the notion of sharing in the therapeutic narrative is quite closely related to that in Web 2.0 in two main ways. First, the rise of sharing our emotions with our significant other(s) has also been accompanied by a shift in the boundary between the public and the private, between the kinds of things we can and cannot, or should and should not, tell our partner or friends. The contemporary relationship, for instance, is based on openness and a lack of secrets between the couple. In certain other cultural contexts, a similar openness is not only socially acceptable but can also be explicitly required. An example of such a context where, as with interpersonal relationships, we can see a shift in the boundary between the public and the private, is the television talk show, epitomized by *Oprah*. A detailed comparison of talk shows and the sharing of personal information through SNSs and other Web 2.0 platforms is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would argue that the fact that both phenomena have been subjected to the same type of criticism is quite telling. Specifically, both the guests on *Oprah* and heavy users of Twitter have been accused of over-sharing and of polluting the public sphere with either inanities or downright inappropriate content (for a discussion of this criticism regarding the use of Twitter, see Arceneaux & Weiss, 2010; for a treatment of such criticism regarding Oprah Winfrey, see Illouz, 2003, esp. Chapter 8). In both instances, the essence of the critique is that the boundary between the private and the public has not been maintained, and that information that should properly be kept private is actually being made public.³

The second way in which sharing in the therapeutic discourse is related to sharing in Web 2.0 is in the way that the former provides semantic inspiration for the latter. In other words, Facebook—which I take as representative of SNSs in general—uses the sense of sharing as constructing intimacy in order to encourage us to share all sorts of non-intimate digital information.

This can be seen in a number of ways. The first can be seen in a blog post by Moira Burke, a “Facebook intern,” entitled *The Role of Sharing in Social Well-Being*.⁴ The theoretical context of the blog is Robert Putnam’s seminal *Bowling Alone* (2000): as Burke explains, “Facebook aims to reduce that very isolation Putnam laments by facilitating sharing with the people we care the most about.” Drawing on survey data, the blog claims that “the more people use Facebook, the better they feel and that those who share and communicate the most with their friends feel even better.” The veracity of the claims made here is not the point: rather, the point is the way in which the act of sharing is seen as responsible for well-being. By way of comparison, in their article on Facebook and social capital, Ellison et al. (2007) use less charged words than sharing, such as “usage” of Facebook and “inter-

³ It is interesting to note that many practices of Collaborative Consumption also involve shifting the boundary between public and private. There is no better example of this than couchsurfing (see airbnb.com), whereby one lets a stranger sleep on one’s couch for a small payment.

⁴ <http://www.facebook.com/blog.php?post=382236972130>, accessed 23.8.2011.

action” on the site. It would appear, therefore, that the Facebook blog under discussion makes explicit use of therapeutic language in the service of Facebook’s commercial agenda.

However, there are also more subtle linkages made between sharing on Facebook and the therapeutic narrative in some of Facebook’s blogs and official pronouncements. This is how the Share button was described by Facebook, for instance: “The Share button enables you to take content from across the Web and share it with your friends on Facebook, where it can be re-shared over and over so the best and most interesting items get noticed by the people you care about.”⁵ Of particular note here is the reference to “the people you care about”: Facebook is trying to harness the association between “sharing” and “caring.” It wants to borrow from the idea of sharing as constitutive of intimate relationships and reapply it to Facebook.

While this is a basic mechanism of advertising, it nonetheless suggests how these new usages of “sharing” might be read. In particular, Facebook would appear to be using the word and exploiting our generally positive feelings toward sharing in order to mystify its business agenda—here, sharing is what Lackoff and Johnson (1980) call a “structural metaphor.” When a user posts something on their Facebook wall, that is called sharing. However, the process by which Facebook culls information from that user’s profile and Facebook activities is *also* called sharing. What is significant here is that what I “share” with Facebook is not the same information as I share with my friends. This, of course, is precisely what enables yet another relationship—that between Facebook and the advertisers who pay for space on its website. Here too the relationship is called “sharing,” as illustrated by this quote: “You can feel confident that Facebook will not share your personal information with advertisers unless and until you want to share that information.”⁶ In sum, the identification of sharing with caring, and the use of a rhetoric of sharing to describe purely business relationships, suggest that the implications of sharing from the therapeutic narrative are indeed borrowed by Facebook in order to imbue that latter with some of the attributes of the former, such as intimacy, trust and equality.

Conclusion

We have now come full circle. In the introduction to this paper it was suggested that when we emically analyze the notion of sharing in a number of different spheres, we end up with something that is greater than the sum of its parts. In this concluding section I would like to substantiate this claim by putting forward three tentative propositions for further study.

⁵ <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=165161437130>, accessed 23.8.2011.

⁶ See <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=101470352130>, accessed 23.8.2011.

First, given the interrelations between the three spheres of sharing discussed above, it would appear that a full understanding of one sphere of sharing requires an appreciation of the others as well. For instance, the deployment of a rhetoric of sharing by Facebook draws on the meanings of sharing in the therapeutic narrative. Or: the technological affordances of Web 2.0 enable new types of sharing economies of both production and consumption. These interrelations might be at least partly explained in terms of Lakoff and Johnson's observation that "metaphorical concepts are ways of partially structuring one experience in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980 p. 77), though if the proponents of Collaborative Consumption are to be believed, then merely by participating in Web 2.0 we are likely to become more positively disposed to sharing concrete things.

Second, the above mentioned contemporary practices of sharing—in Web 2.0, in sharing economies, and in intimate relationships—all quite clearly involve shifting boundaries between the public and the private. In Web 2.0 this is easily seen in both academic research into the implications of SNS use for privacy, as well as in the intense public discourse in this regard. The example of couchsurfing as a practice that blurs public/private boundaries has already been mentioned, to which we might add the visual play on words on the front cover of *What's Mine is Yours* (Botsman & Rogers, 2010): the letter Y at the beginning of "Yours" is written in a different color from the rest of the word, thus deliberately collapsing "yours" (the private) into "ours" (the public).

Third, and most tentatively, perhaps we should start to see sharing as central to the structure of personhood among so-called Generation Y, or Millennials (see Strauss & Howe, 2000). In interviews to promote her new book, *Alone Together* (Turkle, 2011), Sherry Turkle has described today's young people as adhering to a creed of "I share, therefore I am" (see New York Times 2011 for example; and see Turkle, 2011, esp. Chapter 9). In particular, she is critical of how young people cannot experience anything without Tweeting about it or writing about it on Facebook. However, perhaps we can take these words of Turkle's and see them as describing—neutrally, non-judgmentally—how a certain type of self orientates itself in the world: it conducts its social life by sharing on online platforms; it conducts its commercial life through various sharing economies; and it conducts its intimate life by sharing emotions and feelings with significant others. This emic view makes no normative claim as to the value or worth of sharing in each of these spheres. What this paper does claim, however, is that if our phenomenological experience of everyday life is mediated by the categories that are expressed through language, then the rise and rise of the notion of sharing deserves our very close attention.

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