
What can anthropology teach us about ‘new’ models of service?

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Abstract

We present an argument for the contribution anthropology can make to our understanding of service worlds based on our forthcoming book, *An Anthropology of Services* [2], arguing that ‘new’ models of service such as peer-to-peer and collaborative services are best understood through the lens of the long history of people providing services to one another – services after all are part of the human condition.

Author Keywords

Anthropology, peer-to-peer services, collaborative services, sharing economy

ACM Classification Keywords

J.3 Social and Behavioral Sciences; K.4.3 Computers and Society; Organizational Impacts

Introduction

Emerging models of service such as peer-to-peer, collaborative, and self-service are grounded in older familiar social practices that anthropologists have long described and analyzed. Anthropology equips us to ask questions that are salient to how we understand these latest trends in service and that sensitize us to the multiple and contested meanings of these ‘sharing’ models and the value ascribed to them [3]. It also provides an epistemology that problematizes taken for granted concepts such as service, collaborative, and sharing; and it provides a vast reservoir of cross-cultural and very long-term data about everyday life that situates services, including sharing services, in the human experience.

The growing importance of services in the world economy has stimulated scholarship aimed at describing and analyzing services in order to understand, modify, and design them. Scholars and practitioners have developed service concepts in their quest to describe, engage, and ultimately have an impact on contemporary service worlds [5]. The concepts used to describe service worlds are enormously consequential for researchers and

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CHI’15, April 27 – May 2, 2015, Soeul, South Korea.

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designers of services and ultimately on the ability to intervene in service worlds. An anthropological assessment of service concepts, one that considers the assumptions and modes of thought that they rest upon, can deepen and enrich our understanding of new sharing models of service.

Definitions of Services

There are numerous definitions of services, but early definitions almost always made reference to how services differ from manufactured goods. Services were characterized as intangible, heterogeneous, with their consumption inseparable from their production, and perishable or unable to be inventoried—taken together these characteristics are known as IHIP [14,8]. Recently scholars have challenged the universality of these defining characteristics of services, pointing out that they are not uniformly applicable to all services and they focus on what services are NOT instead of what they are. In a critical assessment of the IHIP definition of services, Lovelock and Gummesson [9] have suggested that a more universal characteristic of services is that they cannot be owned. That is services give customers the right of access to objects and to the labor and expertise of others. In traditional service models this might involve renting car, gaining access a golf course for a fee, or obtaining the skill of a fitness instructor for a specified period of time.

Servitization of products

In recent years many manufacturing or goods-oriented firms have looked for ways to derive additional value from their products, by providing services and charging for them. So their customers do not own the products, but gain access to services enabled by them. This has been referred to as the servitization of tangible

products where services supplement or replace a firm's traditional product offerings [1]. Firms have been moving toward servitization of products for a number of reasons, but importantly they are realizing there is more profit to be made from selling services enabled by products than from the product itself. In these instances some firms opt to retain ownership of the product, only selling services enabled by the product, while others add after-sale services to their product offerings. A familiar example of the former is renting a car from a rental agency for just when you need it and for the distances driven. Or with newer business models firms may use a Zipcar template where a stable of cars are owned by a firm and become a shared resource for a community with users checking cars in and out for their personal use. Similarly, companies like Salesforce.com, Intuit, and Adobe are providing software as a service (SaaS) where software applications are owned and hosted by service providers and made available to customers via the Internet. The increasing availability of broadband is supporting user access to these digitally-delivered services.

In contrast, there are cases where ownership of the service-enabling product remains with the customer, and services are offered as additional benefit that accrues to the owner of the product for a price. For example, the purchase of a John Deere tractor enables access to services such as using GPS to automatically shift the steering to compensate for implement drift. John Deere offers this as a service that can be purchased as an add-on to the purchase of the tractor itself. Newer business models rely on individuals or networks of individuals owning the products through which services are delivered. For example, Uber relies

on drivers owning their own cars that are used to provide taxi services.

Sharing Economy

The servitization of products has resonance with the emergence of the so-called 'sharing economy' where ownership of things is secondary to the value that can be obtained from their use and/or derivative outputs (e.g. data from Google searches). Services that were once marketed by for-profit firms are now being proffered by individuals assembled through technology-enabled networks. These peer-to-peer offerings are bypassing traditional service providers and enabling people to procure services directly. Self-service models have been around for a long time [6] where people offered a kind of 'help yourself' experience, as when bank customers use ATMs to withdraw money from their bank accounts. More recently self-serve has expanded into a 'help each other' model of self-service, exemplified by such start-up companies as Airbnb, Lyft, Zopa and Casserole [4]. This new category of services mobilizes 'peer-to-peer' networks of service providers as well as service recipients, where individuals develop new relationships to capital and to each other. For example, Airbnb allows individuals to offer spare rooms in their homes by becoming part of a network of 'hotel' rooms where 'under-utilized' assets are made available to guests who search, select, negotiate, pay for, and review the service. This has led many observers to consider how these changing models of ownership are affecting society more broadly. For example, Thackara [13: 7] notes, "For more or less anything heavy and fixed, we don't have to own them—just know how and where to find them." And information technology is helping to make finding them a whole lot easier. These help each other services are having a significant effect

on many industries, including tourism, transport, and even restaurant services.

Discussions of help each other services often juxtapose them with services provided by existing businesses such as taxi companies and hotel chains where new models disrupt familiar ways of doing business. In such cases, long-standing jobs may be threatened by technologically-savvy owners of tangible goods such as cars, houses, apartments, and even kitchens who participate, some only dabbling, in these new service models. While our examples have all been of for-profit firms that are seeing increased competition from these newer peer-to-peer models of service, the same mechanisms are at play in government and community services. In effect, services not provided to people as government entitlements are being offered by people who are bound through ties of reciprocity, often mediated by new technologies. These supposed collaborative services [10], where citizens, neighbors, or loosely aligned extended 'communities.' directly provide services such as childcare, meal preparation, rides to appointments, urban cleanup days, all services that governmental service agencies could and sometimes do provide, raise issues regarding the proper role of government in people's lives and in how wealth is redistributed.

Collaborative services are simultaneously innovative and traditional, and they suggest a need to rethink our understanding of services and how they are situated in the human condition. For example, time banking [11,12], one of the mechanism of collaborative services, connects to a long history of neighbors helping neighbors such as the barn raising traditions of farmers where people would come together to erect a

barn for a family in need. Today technology is making it easier to keep track of people's time investments, where in the past, for example, farmers kept only an informal accounting of the contribution of neighbors often through stories recounted at community gatherings. Time banking, seen as "an alternative economic paradigm to exchanges of money...where everyone's contributions are valued on the same scale (time) [7: 137]", promises to add rigor and accountability to more traditional models of neighborly reciprocity. That said, collaborative services are changing, and not always in benign ways, the way people connect to each other, to their possessions, to employment, and to their governments.

Implications

Some have suggested that the emergence of these help each other services is leading to more communal and resource conserving lifestyles where the ability to connect "...people, resources, and places to each other in new combinations, on a real-time basis, delivers demand-responsive services that, when combined with location awareness and dynamic resource allocation, have the potential to reduce drastically the amount of hardware—from gadgets to buildings—that we need to function effectively [13: 84]." Clearly, the shifting service landscape, in part enabled by technology, is changing more than our ownership of things – it is reworking people's relations to one another and to divisions of labor.

It is difficult to imagine how we can understand these transformations in contemporary social life without understanding the service worlds that flow into and out of the everyday lives of people. These changes constitute a shift in how people relate and interact,

what they value or think is part of the good life, and even what it means to be a person. The 'new' models of service are shifting services away from ones defined by business and marketing and instead raise questions about civil society and the state as regulators of behavior. These new sharing services may seem novel and transformative, but at the same time they ground services in a version of the social contract that has long guided relations people have with one another and the institutions that are designed to serve them. While this makes services even more important, much of what we think we know about services comes from business and engineering models, and we suggest that these models make sense only in a particular historical era. They are inadequate to address any 'remaking' of society around services which we argue requires the holistic lens provided by anthropology.

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